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THE MASKED MYSTERY; or, The Black Crescent.

BY ANTHONY P. MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "JACK SIMONS, DETECTIVE," "THE MAN SPIDER," "THE MAN OF STEEL," ETC., ETC., ETC.



"HA! A WITNESS!" HE CRIED, AS HE TURNED AND BEHELD A WOMAN IN BLACK GARMENTS, AND CLOSELY VAILED.

The Masked Mystery;

OR,

THE BLACK CRESCENT.

A Romance of Baltimore.

BY ANTHONY P. MORRIS,
AUTHOR OF "THE FIRE-FIENDS," "AZHORT,
THE AXMAN," "THE FRENCH
SPY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR.

WINTER—1871. How mournful the dull, half-smothered voice of the wind as it coursed around the corners and through the streets of the old Monumental! How peculiar the sound of business hum, and how dreary the darkness of advancing night, misted with thick-falling snow!

It was very cold and cheerless; but the rich parlors of Harnden Forde, on Eutaw street, were ablaze and warm, and no gloomy touch of the icy air without could enter there.

Eola Forde, a beautiful girl of twenty-two years—we say girl, for four of those years might have been stricken off without being missed—with rosy cheeks, sweet lips, deep-blue eyes, and hair like gilded silk, sat upon one of the rich sofas; and a dainty hand was clasped by a young man at her side, whose words, anon, brought a mantling crimson to the temples of his companion.

At a glance we know them to be lovers.

"Speak, Eola; why are you so silent? You never acted in this way before! Oh! have you changed toward me? Have I lost the jewel I so dearly prized as my own? Surely—"

"Austin, Austin," she interrupted, at last, breaking the silence which had called forth the young man's words; "I have not changed—indeed I have not. But—but—"

"But what? Ah! you'll tell me, now, why you have behaved so singularly all the evening?"

She cast a quick glance around her to be sure that they were alone, and then, leaning close to him, whispered:

"Dear Austin, could my own heart's blood be shed to make you happy, I would give it! But listen; something has happened—I don't know what—to make me really afraid of father. He said that, if I married you, it would send him to his grave, and I would be accursed forever! Stop!—listen; he said you were sent to fulfill a terrible prophecy!—to perform an awful mission! He said I must not marry you, of all persons!—better stab myself at once! Now, Austin—oh! what can all this mean? You don't know how frightened I am! What—what shall I do?"

She had scarce ceased, when the folding-doors between the two parlors were slowly, noiselessly opened, and a man stood there, gazing steadfastly at them.

The sofa partially fronted the windows, and they did not see him.

He was a man of full sixty years, with spare locks of snowy white, and smooth-shaven face. His features were remarkably thin, like his body, arms and limbs. The eyes were deeply sunken and a dark line marred the lower lid; while the countenance was ghastly pale and of indefinable expression. It was Harnden Forde.

With one hand upon the door-knob—still and motionless he watched them.

Austin Burns looked upon the fair girl at his side in veriest astonishment.

"In Heaven's name, Eola!—what are you saying?"

"Just what father said to me this morning, Austin! What am I to do? I am not only at a loss to understand what he meant, but I am also terribly uneasy. Have you seen him since you were here last?"

"No."

"Then you can form no idea of the change that has come over him."

"I am amazed, Eola! Oh! can it be I am to lose you?" and he clasped the little hand tighter, as if afraid it was to be snatched away there and then.

"No—no—no, Austin; not that! But—we must wait—wait until—"

"ETERNITY!" interrupted a sepulchral voice.

Harnden Forde stood before them.

With a cry, Eola started to her feet and

clutched the back of the sofa for support, as she shrunk before the strange light of her father's eyes.

"Mr. Forde; really you take us by surprise—" began Austin; but he stopped short, as the old gentleman fixed a steady, half-meaningless gaze upon him.

He then saw in Harnden Forde a picture that, for a moment, chilled his veins.

So thin, pale, haggard; like a living corpse; with ashen lips; speechless; terrible to contemplate.

Harnden Forde spoke not another word; but raising one hand, a long, white, skinny finger pointed toward the door.

"Father! Father!" burst from Eola's lips, as she made a movement forward; but her courage failed her.

Obeying the silent command of that finger, governed by an uncontrollable awe, Austin arose, and step by step, retreated from the room.

Eola strove to speak. She stretched forth her hands to detain her lover; but they fell nerveless at her side, and her lips seemed glued together.

The eyes of Harnden Forde followed Austin, till the latter had disappeared, and then, in a hollow voice, he bade his daughter follow him, and returned to the back parlor.

She was faint and dizzy, and tottered after him—feeling as though she would cast herself down and scream; but was forced to keep her feet by some nameless, irresistible power.

"Father!" she cried, falling on her knees beside the chair where he had seated himself; "father! oh! in Heaven's name, tell me what ails you? You frighten me! Don't look at me in that way!"

"My child—you have seen Austin Burns again, and I told you yesterday it was my wish that you should give him up forever," were his slow-spoken words, as he fixed his dark, sunken eyes upon her, in an unsteady, wavering manner.

"Yes, yes; but I told him we could not think of marriage at—at present."

"You can never marry him!" he declared, huskily, bending forward to lay a hand upon her shoulder.

"Never, father?"

"Ay, never! Would you be cursed? Would you live on, with a most horrible prophecy being fulfilled, in which Heaven itself could not offer a boon of one hour's peace? Would you send me to my grave?—only to be driven from it, to stalk the toomby forests in unrest and despair? Would you—"

"Stop! Stop! What horrible things are you saying? You will drive me distracted! Tell me—tell me—what is the matter?"

"I cannot!" and with the answer he sunk back and closed his eyes, as if to shut out some unearthly vision which rose before him.

Eola trembled. What could so work up her father to a pitch of mysterious despair and superstitious terror? In what way was this superstition connected with Austin Burns and herself?

It was more unaccountable, from the fact that, hitherto, Harnden Forde had always greeted the young man cordially, when the latter visited his betrothed.

And the change in Forde's demeanor was as sudden, as abrupt as the explosion of a cannon in hidden ambush.

"Father," she said, more calmly, after a moment's silence, "you talk to me in riddles. You have always expressed a great liking for Austin. It was only yesterday you first mentioned a change in your opinion. What has he done?"

"Nothing," in a subdued, uneven tone.

"Nothing! And while he has no fault, you would not have me marry him? Father, I must resist this. Have you been dreaming?—had ugly nightmares?—which you give in extenuation for this separation of two fond, devoted hearts? You must explain. I fear I have already lost Austin, by what has occurred this evening. I must send a note and bring him back—"

"No! no! The curse!—the prophecy!" he interrupted in a hollow voice, and half-starting up.

"The curse! What curse? What prophecy?"

Eola's inquiry was one of unbounded astonishment.

"Nothing, nothing. Go to your room, my child. Ask me no more of this. But remember—woe! woe! to you, from the day you

marry Austin Burns. Let him bid you adieu forever. Now go—go to your room!"

Reluctantly she left him. He did not rise; and with a parting glance at her singularly-altered parent, as he sat like a statue, with eyelids closed and arms hanging listlessly, she ascended to her room, her mind turbid with wondering and uneasy thoughts.

She had scarce left him when the door-bell struck with a louder echo than usual to its small brass gong.

There was something in the clear sound as it broke the stillness of the house, which roused Harnden Forde with a start from his random reverie; and he listened to the step of the servant who answered the summons.

Presently the door of the back parlor opened.

"There's a man in the vestibule to see you, sir."

"Who—who is it?"

"That I don't know, sir; for his face is hid by a broad-brim hat."

"Is there no card?—no name?"

"No, sir."

Harnden Forde thought a moment. It was already growing late. Who would call upon him at that hour?

"Show him in," he said, at last.

The visitor was admitted.

A tall, broad-shouldered individual, wrapped in a heavy overcoat, with pants tucked in a pair of heavy cowhide boots, and a black, slouch hat pulled down over his brow.

But, the servant had made a mistake in supposing that the rim of the hat concealed the face of the comer; it was a mask of brown silk and lace trimming.

Upon his entrance, Forde arose.

"You wish to see me, sir?"

"And is this, indeed, Harnden Forde?" returned a deep voice, questioningly.

"It is."

"How changed, since last we met," continued the other, regarding him closely.

"Remove your mask, that I may—"

"No. Here—read this," producing a slip of paper as he spoke.

The voice—the mien of the masked visitor, had a marked effect upon Forde, who vainly endeavored to pierce the other's disguise.

"Who are you?" be asked, without noticing the outstretched hand.

"No matter. Read that note, and—give me an answer!"

Advancing with infirm step, he took the note, and, unfolding it, began to read.

But, he had no sooner glanced over the first lines, than he uttered a sharp cry, and, with face paler than ever, staggered back against the wall.

"Who—who—who are you? Where did you get this?" he gasped, chokingly.

"I have said it matters not who I am. Give me an answer to that note. There is a pencil—and paper," saying which, the unknown produced the articles and laid them upon the table. Then he added, pointing to them, and turning to the shrinking form of Harnden Forde:

"Come!"

CHAPTER II.

A BLOW IN THE DARK, AND THE WOMAN IN BLACK.

At the moment we introduced Austin Burns and his betrothed to the reader, in the parlors of Harnden Forde, there was an individual standing on the opposite side of the street, obscured within the deep shadows of one of the high-railing steps which were prominent in that locality.

In one hand he held a pair of powerful glasses, and through these he was intently watching the lovers.

His brow knit with a frown, and his teeth gritted in half-smothered anger, as he marked their actions.

"Ah! see!" he muttered, presently; "the folding doors open—Forde is standing there—now he advances—he stands before them—he points to the door! Good! Austin Burns is going—yes, Forde has obeyed me. See! Eola—she attempts to stay her lover—it is useless! Father and daughter are alone—they go to the back parlor! I am obeyed! Ha! h—al! But, Burns is coming out! Now, will the boy execute his errand? Yes—there—"

"Evening Bulletin, second edition. Bulletin, sir? One cent."

"No," and young Burns was hastening away; when the boy ran alongside of him, and continued:

"I guess you must be he, sir; is your name Burns?"

"Yea." Austin paused.

"Then, here's a letter for you, sir; I was told to give it to you—if your name's Burns?"

"That's my name," snatching the note, almost involuntarily; for his mind was too full of other thoughts to particularly remark this occurrence.

In a moment the boy vanished, his clear voice crying his last copy of the *Bulletin*, upon which he was "stuck"—a thing unaccountable, when considering the impetus given to the circulation of that paper by its having been the first to furnish Baltimoreans with the authentic news of the downfall of Paris.

Walking to the nearest gaslight, Austin read as follows:

"Meet me, to-night, on the Jones's Falls bridge, at Fayette street, and your life mystery shall be solved. I will tell you who you are."

"A FRIEND."

The tiny paper was crunched in his grasp, and an indescribable thrill shot through his frame.

"Who can it be?" he exclaimed, gazing vacantly at the snow-covered pavement. "Who can tell me who I am? Heavens! I never thought! Can the mystery of my identity be the cause of Forde's behavior toward me? But, how could he have learned—Ah! here—some one will explain all! Then, Eola—dear, sweet girl!—I may possess you yet, if that is the ground of your father's action! How opportune this friend!"

He consulted his watch. It was after ten o'clock.

"The note does not say what time. I'll go no more."

He started off at a quick pace, carefully preserving the note; for it was most valuable to him.

At the corner of Baltimore and Eutaw streets, a car overtook him, and getting in, he seated himself to meditate in eager anticipation of the expected news.

The man on the opposite side of the street followed after him, and when Austin got into the car, he of the glasses ran ahead and jumped onto the front platform, bearing the driver's snowy "berth."

Both the watcher and the watched were scarce out of sight, when a man and woman, who had evidently been spying the movements of the others, glided out from the shade of another door-step, close by.

"Start upon your mission, Wat," said the woman; "I will be at the library window at twelve. There's mischief afoot, and I must prevent it."

With these words, she sped after the car; while the man took his way across the street.

The last-named party was the bearer of the note which preyed so overwhelmingly upon the mind of Harnden Forde.

A word of Austin Burns at this point.

He was, at least, twenty-five years of age. His face was not what the fastidious would term handsome; but there was that in it which bespoke an honorable mind, and therefore, won respect.

The young man knew no relative in the world. When in his twentieth year, he was called to the bedside of one whom he had always considered his uncle—then dying. And there he learned something astounding of himself.

The gentleman was not his uncle; but had assumed that position toward him, ever since the night he found Austin upon his door-step, with the little chubby hands tightly clasping a purse containing notes to the amount of twenty thousand dollars!

Fortunately, he fell into good hands. The money was placed out at interest, and appropriated to the benefit of the little waif.

Austin received a thorough education, grew to the estate of manhood, and, at the crisis mentioned, came into the possession of the money.

But the mystery of his birth was a burden to his mind.

Nothing seemed to present in which he could discover a clew; and time and again he had given over, discouraged—only to find himself yearning more and more, as the months flew by, for one bright ray to dispel the cloud.

An acquaintance was formed with Eola. They grew intimate—loved. Harnden Forde gave him warmest encouragement; and the scene which had been enacted within the half-

hour, the unfathomable words of Eola—both combined to strike upon his brain like a thunderbolt, to confuse and distract his thoughts.

But, if Harnden Forde had discovered the young man's ignorance of his birth, and his late action was based upon that, then Eola was not yet lost!

"A friend" was ready to aid, to clear the mystery, to furnish all desirable information.

Alighting at Harrison street, he walked up to Fayette and turned to the bridge.

It was a dim, uninviting locality. The snow had ceased to fall, and the murky surroundings lent a deserted gloom; while the high shot-tower reared its loftily bulk before him, like a grim specter of gigantic proportions.

"There is no one here!" fell from his lips, as he looked about him for some sign of the "friend."

As if in reply, there was a light step behind him, and a muffled figure came up.

"You are Austin Burns?" said an unknown voice, from behind a thick coat-collar.

"That is my name. Did you send me a note?"

"Yes."

"Then I am here in answer to it. You signed yourself 'a friend.' I do not know you."

"You are the affianced of Eola Forde?"

"I am; but it does not concern you."

"It does—"

"This is not our business, sir," interrupted the young man.

The figure drew nigher. But, Austin was not suspicious.

"You would know who you are! But I cannot tell you—"

"Then you have written a falsehood! For what purpose?"

"This! curse you!"

Something flashed before the young man's eyes. There was a quick bound—a thud—and Austin, with a faint groan, sunk down upon the snow.

"Murderer!" hissed a voice in the ear of the unknown.

"Ha! a witness!" he cried, as he turned and beheld a woman in black garments, and closely veiled.

Again the murderous knife was poised to strike, when she threw back the veil, and stepped to within a few inches of him.

One glance, one searching scrutiny of a moment's duration, and, with a startled exclamation, he fled from the white face which so fearlessly confronted him, as if pursued by an apparition from the grave, dropping the knife in his precipitate retreat.

Kneeling beside Austin Burns, the woman placed a hand over his heart. It still beat.

The warm blood, from an ugly wound in the left shoulder, crimsoned the white carpet about them.

But the blow had not proven fatal; and though she might not have been a physician or surgeon, she saw this, and, also, that he was not entirely insensible.

Overcome by the suddenness of the assault, wrought upon by the peculiar sensation of cold steel in his flesh, besides the fact of having struck his head against the wooden railing as he fell, Austin lay in a semi-conscious state.

Presently he opened his eyes, and, under the impression that the would-be assassin stood over him, he made an effort to regain his feet, at the same time grasping the arm that was busy stanching the cut.

"Easy, sir. Be very careful. You are badly hurt."

"Who are you?" he asked, faintly, perceiving, for the first time, that it was a woman.

"A friend," was her brief reply, still busy with his wound.

"Ah! then you sent me the note which brought me here—and to this accident!"

"No. It was an enemy to both of us. I had hoped to prevent this, but arrived too late. There—rise now. But move slowly. Your wound can be better dressed, soon."

"Where is the wretch who struck me?"

"Gone. But, come, Mr. Burns, you must go with me. I do not live far."

"You know my name? You are a stranger to me."

"Though a stranger, you have not a truer friend. Trust me, and you shall not regret it. Your life is not safe in the city of Baltimore, while you are the affianced of Eola Forde! There are those who hate you; and the hate is deadly, for you do not know your enemies."

"Ah! here is the knife!" (picking up the weapon, whose bright blade had attracted her glance).

"Come, now. Your enemies must think you dead. It will serve our plans to defeat them. I am deeply concerned in your welfare, Mr. Burns—deeper than you can imagine. Come."

Guided by an impulse, which prompted him to obey, he went with her.

They slowly left the bridge; he holding to her arm for slight assistance; for the loss of considerable blood had left him in a condition somewhat weakened.

Continuing eastward a few squares, they entered a neat, two-story brick house, and Austin found himself in a plainly furnished but cosey parlor, where a glowing grate afforded a cheering warmth to his benumbed limbs.

"Be seated, sir. This is my home. I have no friends—live almost entirely alone. It may not be long before you know *why* I prefer seclusion, and *why* I am interested in you. Stay here, while I go for a physician," saying which she went out, and left him to his thoughts.

During the few seconds of her speech, he had seen by the light of two large, brilliantly burning lamps, that his new friend was, to judge closely, about forty-four or five, with sad countenance, and dark eyes of weary glance. Her mien was that of a lady, and on the third finger of the left hand was a marriage-ring, worn thin with the lapse of time.

While Austin Burns was fixing the features of the dark-habited lady in his mind, and enduring no little pain from the stab in his shoulder, as he sat there awaiting her return with medical assistance—at precisely the same moment, two men were standing near the small side-counter at "Wilson's," seemingly engrossed with discussing the flavor and steam of a hot "punch;" while an occasional glance over the shoulder betrayed the fact that they feared a third party to their low-voiced conversation.

CHAPTER III.

TWO THREATENING LETTERS AND A DESPERATE ACTION.

FURTHER back, closer to the wall, as if he momentarily expected a deadly attack on the part of the man before him, shrank Harnden Forde.

His lower jaw hung, and his sunken eyes seemed, for a second, to lose all light of intelligence—to become the orbs of a helpless idiot.

Helpless he certainly was; palsied in voice and limb, save that, in the latter, he trembled like a weakened frame before a stunning blast.

And this state of spirit, crushed beneath the weight of some mighty terror, was caused by the note he had just read.

At last with an effort which required his every strength of self-mastery, he gasped, while he still cowered before his strange visitor:

"Will you tell me who you are? Where do you come from?"

"Again, and for the last time, I say no matter. You know who I come from; so let that suffice. Come, your answer."

"Is—is the woman in this city?" persisted Forde, tremulously, and scarce above his breath.

"Answer that note!" commanded the other, impatiently.

Compelled by an influence which mechanically controlled his actions, Harnden Forde staggered to a seat at the table, and snatching up the pencil, wrote:

"I dare not refuse!"

"There is my answer," he faltered, dropping the pencil, and pushing the paper from him.

Again he essayed to pierce the other's mask. In vain.

The man took up the slip, read it, and then carefully placed it in his breast-pocket, saying:

"It is satisfactory. See that you obey. Now, I am your guest for to-night."

"Ha—"

"Ay; why not? The Eutaw House is a good distance from here, and the walking is bad. Perhaps I shall leave the city to-morrow. It is late—have me shown to my room."

"Tell me who you are?" again asked Forde, huskily.

The eyes of the questioned party fixed piercingly upon the interrogator; and then their owner said, forcibly:

"I am a friend to the victim of your early wickedness. I am her champion. She is near you—"

"Near me? In this city?" and he leaned eagerly forward to catch the reply.

"Have you ever repented your vile deed of years agone?" continued he of the disguise, without noticing the interruption.

"I have! I have!" groaned Forde, burying his face in his hands. "Would to Heaven that what is done could be undone—with out—"

"Without hurting your interests, you would say? Bah!"

"Man, hear me"—a portion of his strength seeming to return, as he stepped forward and grasped the wrist of the veiled "champion"—"if Bertha Blake is in this city, lead me to her! She loved me once; she may hate me now; but she will forgive when—"

"Mark me, Harnden Forde: I will do this, if—"

"It what? Speak! It shall be done."

"Hold. You are hasty. But let me test your sincerity. Where is the certificate of marriage between you and Bertha Blake?"

"In my des—" he checked himself.

There was something in the fire of those mask-encircled eyes, which betrayed suspense and eagerness in the listener; and for his intended words, he substituted:

"You shall have it, if Bertha Blake will leave me, forever."

"That is but half. Two articles must come together. I will not accept one without the other—*The Black Crescent!*"

With a cry that might have resembled the wail of a lost soul entering the regions of eternal misery, Forde reeled backward and fell to the floor.

The first movement of the man was to lock the door; which he did quickly. For the cry had been heard, and footsteps approaching soon sounded in the entry.

Taking up a pitcher of water, he sprinkled the face of the suddenly and singularly-stricken old gentleman.

Presently the latter opened his eyes, and, at the same instant, came a knock at the door.

"Bid them begone," commanded the unknown, in a whisper.

Forde ordered his servants to depart, and then added, as he arose feebly to his feet:

"For God's sake!—be merciful. Make me your slave, if you will; but I cannot give that up. I won't!—be my shame what it may—at once. Have—have you no sympathy for penitence?"

"It is useless. The time for repentance is past—past three years ago, when you spurned Bertha Blake—for the second time from you! I, her champion, swear that you shall yet make amends for the vile injustice she has suffered at your hands! Her claim shall be recognized! The Black Crescent shall be restored!"

Forde did not sink at this second mention of the mysterious Crescent; but from his ashen lips fell, beseechingly:

"No—no—no; consider my position! To be dragged down now! To be buried, like an accursed pygmy upon a hooting world! To—"

"Like you served Bertha Blake! You were anxious, a moment since, to make amends! Miserable man! You think all who witnessed your secret marriage are dead? You mistake. But enough. Hark ye—if you disregard the order of that note, you are blasted, at once. Obey, and you may, at least, be safe for a time. Cease. I care not to continue this conversation. Have me shown to my room."

With trembling hand, Forde pulled the bell-cord; and the man unlocked the door.

"Show—show this—gentleman to the third-story back-room," to the servant-girl who answered the summons.

She obeyed the order, her eyes widening, and mouth agape, as she conducted the disguised visitor up-stairs.

When the masked guest had closed the door of the room allotted to his use, he threw aside the mask, and removed his hat. Then we see that he is a fine specimen of manhood; strong, healthy, perhaps forty years of age, with smoothly-shaven face, regular features, and an eye of electric glance.

"Now," he mused, seating himself in a large, cushion-back chair, "I am satisfied of success. He dared not refuse me a room for the night. Poor, weak, superstitious fool! But a villain withal; though he is now tortured with repentance. Bertha will ascend to the

library window at twelve. I will let her in. We will search the desk, the prize must be there! He checked himself in his speech awhile ago; but I am sure he would have said, 'In my desk.' The Black Crescent and the certificate!—these once found, and then, my poor, wronged Bertha, you shall be cleared of the foul slander which couples with your name in Richmond, and throw off the penniless garb put upon you by this wretch, whose superstition has well-nigh ruined you. The curse and prophecy weigh heavily upon his mind."

Dwelling upon some plot which evidently absorbed his thoughts, he relapsed into silence, and sat awaiting the arrival of midnight.

But, whether the plan afoot was one of necessity or mere desire, there was a train of events pending which tended to destroy his calculations, and the beginning of it was, he fell asleep as he sat blinking at the coals in the grate.

The moments flew on. The stranger slumbered; though, had some invisible mouth whispered in his ear the coming result of his lack-vigil, a flash of lightning could not have been quicker, more sudden, than his return to wakefulness.

Harnden Forde was alone—miserable and mind-racked, in mental torture.

Reseating himself at the table, he drew forth a document from an inner pocket, and, first making sure he was alone, began to read.

And this is what he read:

"MR. HARNDEN FORDE:—

"As you have given me to understand, so emphatically, that my suit for Eola's hand is useless, I propose to convince you that I am not so easily put off. To do this I will use two things; one, a name—Bertha Blake; the other, a date—Dec. 20th, 1863. Of the first, I know all. Of the second, I hold the paper itself, and can summon a witness. More: do you remember the curse?—the prophecy? If you do, then beware! *Austin Burns is the son of Bertha Blake—born, 1846!* When he shall marry Eola Forde, the prophecy is out, and the curse is to be fulfilled! But the marriage must not be. Avert the calamity by forcing her to become *my* wife. I shall call day after to-morrow, to dine. See that you press my suit on that occasion. *Austin Burns calls to see Eola to-morrow evening.* If they meet, see that you order him from the house, without giving him opportunity to question you. Moreover, impress upon Eola's mind that she can never become the wife of *Austin Burns.* Disobey me, if you dare."

"Your ob't serv't,

"HAROLD HAXON."

"This—I—received—yesterday," he murmured, brokenly, and shivering as with an ague. "I am in his power. He knows all, and a word from him—God! I had fondly hoped to see Austin lead my child to the altar. But I must obey Haxon! I must! Yet how can I? Now this one!"

His fingers twitched nervously as he opened and read the note brought him by the masked visitor.

It ran thus:

"HARNDEN FORDE:—I am watching you. One word from me, and your shame is inevitable. The stolen record is in my possession. There is a witness yet alive. The lawyer, your former tool, still lives, and is my ally. To the point, though: a young man, named *Austin Burns*, is the accepted lover of your child, Eola. I command you, do not hinder their union. Obey me."

BERTHA."

"And this—this from—who can he be? Between these two, merciful Heaven! what course is left me? How willingly would I obey this last note! I have already answered 'I dare not refuse.' But the two order differently. Oh! would not Bertha, for Eola's sake, forgive me? But the Crescent! no!—no!—no! I cannot part with that. I am given a respite. But such a respite! I cannot bear shame, after these years of proud position and wealth! I thought Bertha was dead. But she is not. She is in this city, and she has borne the wound of a broken heart so long! Mad fool that I was, to love Louise Ternor! I shall be destroyed—Ha!"

He had started from the chair, and was pacing the room, when he halted suddenly, and began twisting his skinny fingers through his sparse locks, as he stared at the figured carpet. An idea had struck him.

"Yes; there is one escape,"—casting a fearful glance about him, lest the listening walls should catch his husky utterances—"I am desperate! I am wild! A knife-blow I could bear; but *shame*—never! never! and once exposed by either of these, I am blasted before the world! They must die—all!—all!" but without a pause, and waving his hands before him, as if to shut out the horrible plan his excited brain had conjured, he took two or three steps backward, and his voice sunk to a whisper as he added:

"No!—no!—no! not murder! Bertha Blake must be found. She said the lawyer was not dead! Thank Heaven!—my hands are cleared of that! Would the fiends had him at this moment, though! I'll go to Bertha. I'll beg, beseech, for Eola's sake—mercy! mercy, that I may obey Harold Haxon, and save myself from the curse! And her 'champion'—he shall tell me where she is! I must not kill him! I shiver! How cold it must be outside!"

He restored the papers to his pocket, and turned to a decanter of brandy on a stand in one corner. Of the liquor he drank heavily, and then settled himself in a chair.

The silver bells of a tower clock, in the hall, had struck the half-hour between eleven and midnight, when, with teeth clinched upon the under lip, till the compressed flesh threatened to burst in cuts, he stole, like a gliding specter, from the parlor.

Proceeding to the kitchen, he provided himself with two ropes: one about three yards long—the other, near three feet. With these, he ascended to the room in the third story.

The door of the apartment was not locked, and cautiously opening it, he peered in.

A grim smile overspread Harnden's sickly-pale face, as he perceived the man sitting, motionless, in the large chair; and by the sound of deep, regular respiration, which came to his ears, he knew that his strange guest slumbered.

On tip toe, he entered. Gradually, and with the tread of a cat, he approached the unconscious man. Reaching his side, he stooped, to get a look at the face, and instantly a tremor seized his limbs, while through his bairas flashed the two words:

"Her brother!"

The discovery appeared to cause him much perplexity. He drew back a step, as if undecided how to act. Within a second's flight, he added, suppressedly:

"He must die—no! no! no! not murder! But he must tell me where she is. Steady, nerves; steady. How I shake!"

Schooling his nerves to calmness, he gently placed the larger rope over the breast and arms of the sleeper, thence conveying it around to the back of the chair, where he knotted it firmly.

Next, with a quick, adroit movement, he threw the remaining rope, in a turn, around the neck of his captive, and cried, hissing:

"Wake up, Wat Blake! Wake up and meet your doom!"

The tone was of such earnestness as to seem like the voice of one who was indeed resolved upon murder.

With a gurgling exclamation, a twitch of the muscles, Wat Blake aroused, and essayed to release himself.

But the cords were strong. The turn at his neck was choking him. Harnden Forde's knee pressed firmly against his breast.

He could not speak; and, with eyes starting, and features alternately reddening and whitening under the torture of strangulation, he looked up into the fierce countenance that glowered over him.

For a moment Forde slackened the tension of the rope, and cried:

"I know you, Wat Blake; though you were but a boy when I married your sister! So you were not lost in the mines, after all! I remember you well!"

"Vil—villain that you are! Would you murder me?"

"Tell me where your sister is!"

"I shall not!"

"Your stubbornness will not save your life!"

tightening the cord again.

"I care—n—not! Kil—l me! My death will be aveng—urg—g—g—"

He was strangling.

"I cannot kill him!" flashed through Forde's mind; but he was determined to wring the desired information from his enemy, and, partially maddened by a contemplation of his situation—between two fires, the flames of both threatening to wrap him up in rude tongues of shame!—he twined his fingers round the ends of the rope, and pulled, till Blake's eyes rolled upward, and his whole powerful frame was convulsed in a struggle for breath.

"Tell me! Tell me!" he muttered, between gritting teeth, fearing that he was to fail in his desperate means to procure information. "Tell me—qu'ck! You are dying!"

A relaxation of struggle, a fast filiming gaze, was all the answer he received.

Suddenly Forde was dealt a blow upon the head, which felled him senseless to the floor.

When he recovered, Wat Blake had disappeared, and a stout cane, which lay beside him, told with what the unexpected blow had been delivered.

The gas jet was extinguished; but by the dim light shed from the glowing grate, he saw a figure in the doorway.

Hurriedly regaining his feet, he advanced, and was confronted by Eola!

CHAPTER IV.

A PAIR OF VILLAINS AND WHERE ONE WENT.

THE two men who sipped their "punch" sat Wilson's were widely different in face, form and dress.

One was about twenty-four years of age, rather tall, black eyes, effeminate features, dark, straight hair, and an attempt at side-whiskers.

From his fashionable attire we draw inference that he had money; though his vest-pockets might be turned inside out, and, like those of a host innumerable who move among us "on stilts," nowadays, be found the very perfection of emptiness.

This party was Harold Haxon. Sometimes he had money—sometimes he had not. What this occupation was no one knew, and few cared, as long as he dressed well and maintained the *role* of a gentleman.

The other individual was built square and heavy, with a face that bristled with neglected beard, and disgusted one with its leering glance; for the complexion was dirty and brown, and the eyes bloodshot and dull.

Harold Haxon's face was pale as he cast uneasy glances about him, and the hand which held the glass trembled a little.

"I tell you, Gil Bret, I saw the face. I am sure it was she. If there ever was such a woman, she confronted me on the bridge, to-night!"

"Bah! Spooks!" exclaimed Bret, guardedly, while his repulsive features wore an expression of contempt. "I allus said you was a baby, 'ith all your nerve, I did. You'd better 'ave let me do 't. I'd fixed 'im. Then you didn't tickle 'im at all, eh?"

"Yes I did! I struck him once, and I would have finished him but for the sudden appearance as if from the grave—"

"Bah!" Bret interrupted. "Look 'e here now; such things can't be. Didn't we drown'er oursel's, off Locust Point?"

"We did, Gil Bret, and there were others who assisted, who, no doubt, will swear, like you, that she can not be alive. But I am not given to superstition—like old Forde—ha! ha! ha!"

"Jes' so!" chimed in Bret, seeming pleased at the last words of his companion; for he grinned broadly, and nodded his head several times.

Haxon continued:

"Not being superstitious, you see, I know of but one explanation for that which I saw. The woman was not drowned, and is now watching us closely—as is evident from her timely arrival upon the scene to-night. I say timely, for if she had not come, Austin Burns was doomed! I had scarcely strength enough to get away, I was so dumfounded."

"Now, kin this be?" soliloquized Gil Bret, gazing into the nearly-emptied glass.

Then, as if he was more inclined to give credence to Harold Haxon's tale of the ghostly face, he said, whisperingly:

"If she is alive, we aren't safe! She'll have the 'stars' down onto us afore we kin travell. But mind, are you sure the youngster isn't done for as 'tis? Hey?"

"I really can't say."

"You struck 'im 'ith a knife?"

"Certainly! and aimed at his heart!"

"You did, eh? Well, if Gil Bret was to do that 'ere much, he'd know whether somebody weren't hurt or no, he would! Think 'e knew you?"

"Impossible? I was well muffled."

"Settle for them punches, an' let's be out of this."

Harold Haxon discovered sufficient stamps in his pocket to pay for the beverages, and they left Wilson's, going eastward.

"Where are you going, Bret?"

Gil Bret, whose head indicated their direction, answered, gruffly:

"To the bridge. Come on. You can't half do these things, I know. Now, if you was like me, you'd have no difficulty 'ith such jobs. If I'd bu'sted 'im onc't, he'd gone under 'ithout no foolin'."

"But you don't expect to find Austin Burns—"

"If you hit square, he's layin' somewhere near, yet. That woman hasn't had time to drag 'im far."

"But she may have called a policeman—"

"An' if she has, an' if he aren't dead—then you'n' me look out. That's all."

As they hurried past the corner of Gay and Baltimore streets, one of the many loungers who frequent that spot made some remark relative to their rapid gait which displeased Gil Bret.

He paused for a second, clinched his ponderous fist, and had already taken a step toward them, with the intention of inaugurating a fight, when Haxon laid a detaining hand upon his shoulder.

"You've no time for that, Bret; come on."

Thus reminded, the bruiser—for he was such—resumed his way, blaming himself for being so easily aroused.

It was singular that a mere remark should anger Bret. While his brain was far from intellectual, it was neither thick nor weak; and he was never troubled with that peculiar mental density in planning which characterizes most men of his class.

Haxon owed his social position to the brain of Gil Bret. He owed what education he had to Gil Bret, who, he remembered, had looked after him carefully, *since early childhood*. He owed Gil Bret for the promising prospect of marrying Eola Forde. In many ways, Gil Bret was a mystery to him; but that worthy "rough" was as reticent as he was enigmatical.

When the two men reached the bridge at Fayette street, of course Austin Burns had disappeared.

"Come," said Haxon; "I told you he would be gone. I suppose he's dead—I hope so. The *Sun*, *American*, and *Gazette* will have a sensation in their 'Locals' to-morrow. No doubt he has been taken in charge by a policeman, and—"

"There's one thing 'bout you, anyhow, that I like," interrupted Gil Bret.

"And what is that?"

"You take things cool."

Haxon laughed. Besides being wicked, he was conceited, and the compliment pleased him.

"You was allus a cool 'un," added Bret, "ever since I knew you, an' that's been more'n a fortnight."

Haxon laid a hand on his companion's arm.

"I have been in your care, Gil Bret, ever since I was a little boy—almost an infant. What hardness is in my heart I got from you—"

"Jes' so."

"Will the day ever come when you'll tell me all you know of my origin?"

"I'm the one 'at kin do't, Haxy; but 'tain't no more need for you to know bout *yoursel'* 'an it is for that 'ere Burns chap to know 'bout *hissel'*—an' I know all 'bout him, too."

"That is not answering my question. Will you—"

"P'raps," said Bret breaking in.

The rival of Austin Burns peered into the bull-dog visage at his side that was half obscured by the gloom of night. And if he could not see well, he *felt* that there was depicted therein a resolution to say no more on the subject.

"Let us go up-town again," he said, at last.

"Where?"

"Finish the night with billiards at Leache's."

"I mus' go home. My ole crone's a-lookin' for me by this time. You kin go."

"Where will I see you to-morrow, at ten o'clock?"

"Anywhere."

"Corner Lexington and North?"

"Not much," with a shake of his head.

"Why?"

"Cause there'll be a rumpus in that 'ere place to morrow, if this chap's been foun' by a police; an' all 'spicious characters 'll be—"

"I see. Too near the station. Then let it be—"

"Right here."

"Good," and without further exchange of words, Haxon disappeared in the surrounding gloom.

But Gil Bret did not wish to return to the "old crone" at once, as he had given his companion to understand.

He was no sooner alone than, with a chuckle, he stooped down and examined the snow.

"Jes' so!"—he commented upon something he saw—"Haxy did stick him. Here's blood. 'Tain't snowed none since, I guess. Now—'e see"—rising and moving toward the east end of the bridge—" 'ere they go. Blood-tracks. An' there ain't no police been *here*. Here he goes."

As he made his way slowly along, tracking Austin Burns by an occasional drop of blood, he was careful to cover each stain by a push of his foot, and his countenance was expressive of grim satisfaction as he continued on.

He had scarce left the bridge, by the east, when the form of a woman in black arose from a stooping posture near the rail, at the west end, and hastened in the direction of Eutaw street.

"Ah!" she murmured, behind the thick veil which covered her face; "Gil Bret is cunning. Without him to contend against, I could destroy Haxon and his villainous plots. Bret is the center of Haxon's power over Forde. But I have a stern account to settle with both wretches! What oversight in me to leave those tracks behind! Bret will discover Austin's retreat—a thing that will hurt my plans, in a measure—and will connive at another murderous attempt! He dare not do any thing to-night; for the physician is with Austin. Other quarters must be found for the young man. Now, then, for the certificate and the Black Crescent!" quickening her steps almost to a run as she thus concluded.

Gil Bret followed the traces of blood until they ended before the house in which Austin Burns was at that moment.

As he obliterated the last mark upon the snow and wiped away a minute stain upon the door-sill, he exclaimed triumphantly: "Here he is!"

Then he ascended the steps, and, leaning over to the window, looked through the half-closed blinds into the room.

Austin was lying upon a sofa, and over him was bending a man, whose actions at once told that he was a physician.

The young man's breast was exposed, and Gil Bret saw the ugly wound.

"Haxy did tickle 'im some!" thought the bruiser, as he turned away. "An' now, as I know where the chap is, why, I'll give 'im the next shake, an' do some cutting on my own account."

He hastened back over the route he had come, passing Leache's, and soon took a seat in a car of the Blue Line, for South Baltimore.

Next we see him ascending the rickety steps—more like worn boxes thrown roughly together—which lead to the first-story room of one of the filthiest-looking houses in Guilford Alley.

Entering the apartment, which was lighted by a two-cent dip, he glanced around upon its occupants.

At one side was an apology for a stove, and near this sat a woman of full seventy years, withered in countenance, and hair silvered by the frosts of time. Between her teeth was held firmly an old, oil-soaked clay-pipe, and a sickening odor arose from its sizzling bowl.

Near her, attired scantily for the cold season, was a beautiful girl, and as we look upon her we are riveted in astonishment.

Were we not certain that Eola Forde was at that moment in her father's house, we should say that Eola Forde was here before us in this girl.

The counterpart was exact, save that this face was the youngest by at least two years.

She sat gazing absently at the floor, but looked up as Gil Bret entered.

The last feature of the scene was a bed, whereon lay something—a human form—covered with a sheet.

"Is she dead yet?" were the first words of the bruiser, as he closed the door after him.

"Dead!" answered the crone.

"Dead!" echoed the girl, in a low voice that was musical despite the sad tenor in which she spoke.

Gil Bret advanced to the couch, and turned down the sheet.

"An' that's the last of Louise Ternor!" he muttered slowly, contemplating the icy face.

"The last!" said the old woman dismally.

"The last!" echoed the girl.

"Don't you be so gloomy 'bout it!" he exclaimed, wheeling around. "It's nothin' but death, an' we're all a-goin' to die some time."

"She died happy, Gil, my boy." And the girl said:

"Yes—happy."

"Happy! Well, I hope she did—that's all. People don't of'n die very happy when their mind's full of their bad doin's, like hern was. An' I 'spec' I'll kick ag'in' the curb a long time afore I kin die very happy—when I do die!"

"She was forgiven," half-interrupted she of the pipe; and the fair girl, with gaze still bent absently upon the worn planks, added:

"Forgiven in the last hour. How sweet!"

Gil Bret seemed perplexed. He glanced first at one, then at the other, and finally demanded, as he strode to a position between them:

"Forgive, you say? How? Who could forgive 'er?"

"Her old rival, my boy—her old enemy; she was here to-night, right after you went out. But she didn't recognize me."

"Yes, she was here," indorsed the girl.

"You lie, Marian Mead!" he cried. "How kin sich things be? The one 'at she wronged is dead."

"Not dead!" asserted the elder of the females.

"Not dead!" repeated Marian.

He seemed more perplexed, and was a little excited at the announcement.

"No! She weren't! She's dead!"

"She was, too, and she's not dead," went on the crone in a cracked voice; "and she and Louise Ternor had a long talk over by the bed."

"And what 'id they say?—she—both? Hey?"

"I didn't hear—they spoke in whispers, Gil."

"How was she dressed?—the—"

"In black all over."

"In black! then Bertha Blake is alive! Haxy was right!"

He began pacing the narrow limit of the room, his shaggy brows contracted in thought, for the news he had received appeared to trouble him.

CHAPTER V.

"OLE WOMAN, WE'RE BU'ST."

PRESENTLY, Gil Bret advanced to the bed, and inserting his long arm, half its length, between the two mattresses at the head, moved it as if in search of something toward the foot.

"Tain't any use," said the woman, who was noting his actions.

"Blast the luck!" he exclaimed harshly, as he withdrew his arm and faced the two.

"Tain't any use, I said."

"Where's the bag? Hey!—the leather bag?"

"Gone," and Marian echoed the word.

"Gone! No! You don't mean it? Truth, now. I'll choke you both if you tell me any lies! 'Tisn't gone."

"It's gone," returned the old woman, puffing furiously at her pipe. "Louise Ternor gave it to the woman in black."

If Gil Bret was troubled in the knowledge that the woman in black had been in attendance upon Louise Ternor ere the latter passed from this world to the next, the news that the leather bag he inquired for was gone created a stronger excitement in him; for his liquor-bloated cheeks reddened, his dull eyes snapped fire, and he uttered a fierce oath as he strode forward, grasped the crone rudely by the shoulder, and growled savagely:

"Fools! Both fools! Do you know what's in that 'ere bag?"

"Yes," they answered.

"You do?" and be fairly jumped; "what?"

"Money," returned the women.

"Money! Yes—there was money in't! But how much, eh? I'll tell you. There was five thousand dollars in that 'ere bag, in notes an' gold!"

At this the females in turn started. The sum was enormous to them.

"Five thousand dollars!" they repeated in astonishment.

"Yes, there was. Bu'st me to thunder!—this is the worst I ever saw! An' she, Bertha Blake," (here he abused her most indelicately, and in language wonderfully abbreviated) "has got it! Ole woman, I say ag'in, you're a fool!"

The object at whom sped this closing compliment nodded her head, but said nothing.

"She gave me ten dollars before she went away, Gil Bret," said Marian timidly: "if you want that you can have it."

"And me the same," added the crone; "take mine too."

"Bah! I don't want no sich amount. Keep your money. You'll want the whole on't. We've got to split now."

They looked at him inquiringly.

"Put on your hat an' shawl, an' git!" he continued, addressing Marian Mead.

"I don't know what you mean, Gil Bret," looking at him with wide-opened eyes.

"Then I'll tell you," pausing before her, running his hands in his pockets and drawing back his lips until he looked more like a bulldog than ever. "I said we're goin' to split. Cording to grammar, 'split' means dividin' longitudinally. See! Now, put on your things an' git."

She evidently caught his meaning, for she cried:

"You don't want me to go out this cold night, Gil Bret? See! I've hardly any clothes. I would freeze."

"Git up an' git!" raising his voice to a higher pitch and frowning darkly.

She understood. She was to separate from the two beings before her. But, on such a night, in such apparel, to go upon the street! The thought itself sent a chill through her young veins.

Yet, there was an impetus to obey which soothed her sinking spirits.

Marian Mead had never known a relative in this world. From that far date in infancy, to which the matured fancy sometimes takes its flight, to the present hour, she had not known any one who claimed connection with her, save the two in whose company we find her, upon her introduction to the reader.

She had lived with them always in a state of seeming poverty—in the vilest sections and most miserable habitations—yet she had never been forced to beg a morsel, or work for bread.

Ever near, seeming to follow them like a shadow, had been the one who now lay upon the bed, in death's shriveling clutches, Louise Ternor.

This woman had appeared, to her, mysteriously wealthy for one who dressed in rags—and Marian had never seen her but in rags; and though she had never sought, or obtained, any knowledge of her, beyond the fact of her constant presence and an interest in their welfare, still she had been impressed, more than once, with the shade of mental worriment, unconcealable anxiety, which ever rested on Louise Ternor's brow.

It was a short time before the opening of our story, that this Louise Ternor came to Gil Bret's abode in Guilford Alley, stricken with a terrible fever. At Marian's hands, she received constant and loving attention; and at times, the invalid, when gazing up into the sweet face which bent so tenderly over her, would burst into tears, as though the features she beheld, coupled with unspoken thought touched some aching portion of her heart.

On this night, Louise Ternor had been visited by the woman in black, whose presence had acted most strangely on the sinking one.

"At last!" Marian heard her say. "You've come at last! You will forgive! You will! I am dying, now!" and she and the crone had taxed their ears in vain to catch more of the low-voiced conversation that ensued.

When the woman in black was about to depart, Louise Ternor raised herself to her elbow and cried:

"Farewell! I am going! There's Marian—take her! God bless—God bless you, Bertha Blake!" An hour afterward, her spirit had passed through the broad realms of space and ascended to the tribunal of the skies.

The woman in black, before taking leave, drew forth the leather bag, and extracting twenty dollars therefrom, divided it equally between Marian and the old woman. Then imprinting a kiss on the former's lips, she said:

"Take courage, dear girl: I shall soon have you with me. Your life will be a happy one, yet."

The words had set Marian to wondering, after their strange visitor had departed; for they were spoken whisperingly, and for her ear alone.

Gil Bret had never treated Marian rudely; on the contrary, had acted as kindly as was in his illiterate nature. Still, the young girl had ever felt ill at ease with her rough companions—as if she were torn from her proper sphere by a fate which had cast her within these associations, purposely to conflict with the earnest wishes of her heart, which told her she was out of place in such society.

And all this flitted through Marian's mind as she put on the worn hat and threadbare shawl that were hers, and started to obey Bret's order to depart.

"Hold on there a minit," he said, going up to her as she laid her hand upon the door-knob. "You said that woman give you ten dollars—didn't you?"

"Yes. Do you want it?"

"Bah! Shucks! I on'y wanted to know if you had it, that's all. An' sides, look 'e here, I want you to git out of Baltimore. Understand? Go over to Washington. You kin make a livin' there, somehow, easy enough. But, mind now, I don't want to see you roun' here no more."

"I understand," was the meek response.

"Git, then."

When Marian had passed out, Bret turned to the crone, who was knocking the ashes from her pipe, seeming entirely unconcerned by what had transpired.

"Ole woman, we're bu'st!" he declared, flatly and enigmatically, blinking vacantly as his ideas appeared to divide themselves between the words he spoke and a host of thoughts which swelled his brain.

"I say we're bu'st!" he repeated, after a brief silence, jamming his fists into his coat pockets in a manner indicative of a very spiteful humor.

"What do you mean, Gil, my boy?" she inquired, squeakingly.

"I mean that we ain't got no more money, that's all! That 'ere bag had five THOUSAN' DOLLARS in't. I foun' it out a couple o' weeks gone, an' counted on't to ship us through life—see! Now then, it's gone, an' we're bu'st! I ain't got more'n fifty dollars to buy a coffin 'th. You was a fool, ole woman, to let that 'ere bag go!—you was."

"There's one thing left, Gil," she ventured, moving uneasily beneath the gaze of those bear eyes, as they fixed angrily upon her.

"An' what's that, I'd like to know?"

For a second, she returned his steadfast gaze in silence. Then, leaning forward, she spat, between two rows of yellow, decayed, crumbling teeth:

"The Black Crescent!"

Gil Bret started all over—that is, he stepped backward, raised his arms as his two brawny fists clinched, and, while his mouth opened, the dull, muddy eyes brightened as he repeated her words.

"Ha! ha! ha! we ain't bu'st yet—are we? That's good, now. I wouldn't 'a' thought of that. Jes' so! we'll have the crescent! It's a big game; but, I guess Gil Bret kin run the machine, if anybody kin! Ole Forde has got it, an' Haxy's goin' to see 'im to-morrow. Eh—hem! I'll give Haxy some more to say to the ole codge. Yes; we'll have that 'ere crescent! Now then, I'm a-goin' to sleep. We must git in the mornin'. I'll sen' a note to the station, an' Louise Ternor kin be planted in style," saying which, he threw himself on a blanket in one corner, and soon fell asleep.

The old crone snuffed the candle, refilled her pipe, returned to her seat by the stove, and puffing thick clouds of smoke around her, muttered:

"Yes, an' by to-morrow noon, old mother Bret'll be on her way to Washington. I wish you a good time then, Gil, my boy; but, with Bertha Blake in the ring against you, I'm afraid you won't do much. She's a smart woman—very, very smart."

Marian Mead, with fluttering heart, ran from the abode of Gil Bret along the slushy, dirty pave.

When a half-square lay between her and the two to whom she had seemed strangely bound since childhood, but from whom she was now as strangely delivered—then, and not till then, did she slacken her foot-hot speed.

The cloaking murkiness of a dismal night was unrelieved by sight of any human being, and the deep silence was only broken by the occasional howl of some skulking canine, which snarled, growled and snapped, as it met a prowling skeleton of its own race.

Away she sped; drawing the thin shawl

closer round her shoulders—for the air was damp and chill, and her poorly-covered form was shrinking in the searching atmosphere, till she shivered, despite all resistance of the wind.

Still on, with the words of the woman in black lingering in her ears, and a sense of happiness in store.

As she approached the flickering lamp at the corner of Charles street, she came suddenly upon a man whose uniform of blue, with silver badge—she knew not why—caused her a momentary thrill of alarm.

"Heigho!" exclaimed the gruff, but not harsh voice of policeman Knight; "what's this, girl? You're out late. Anybody sick?"

Marian halted. For a second she looked down, hesitatingly, and then, advancing to him, she turned her full eyes upon him, as she said:

"Oh, sir, let me appeal to you! I have no home—no friends. I am all alone, out in this cold night, with scarcely clothes enough to keep me from freezing! Will you not find me a place to sleep?"

Policeman Knight, honest soul, looked down into the upturned face; he saw it was a pure one—that she who spoke was delicate and beautiful. There was no deception in those tones; the lips that molded the words were ripe and fresh. And the eyes—their glance was innocence itself.

His scrutiny was brief, and the action that followed spoke volumes for his giant heart.

"You poor little dove! Yes, I'll help you all I can—come along," and as he drew one of her dainty hands within his arm, his disengaged hand was busy untying the cord at the throat of his great, heavy cape.

"There," he said, as he placed the cape over her shoulders, before she divined his intention; "that'll keep you warm. I suppose you wouldn't like to go ask aid at the station?"

"Oh! no—no. I have a little money, sir. If you will only find me a place to sleep, for tonight, I shall be so much obliged. Some place away from—from this horrid neighborhood; and then, if you want to know more of me, I'll tell you if you'll come to-morrow, when you are off duty. But you must come early; for I'm going away—"

"Yes—yes," he interrupted. "So you've got a little money, eh? Well, I'll find a place for you. Come along. Pull the cape tight around you," and as they walked along, he added, to himself:

"I wonder who she is? Poor—little—girl!"

Marian had often wondered the same thing. But she knew no more of herself than did the kind-hearted policeman.

CHAPTER VI.

A CONVERSATION BEHIND CURTAINS, AND A LISTENER ON THE OTHER SIDE.

HAROLD HAXON must have indulged in something besides billiards, after leaving his rough-looking, rough-spoken, rough-acted friend, Gil Bret; for his eyes were heavy as he sauntered leisurely toward the appointed place of meeting next morning—a five-cent cigar in his mouth, and swinging a black ratan cane.

The day was a beautiful one, with scarce a stray mist to mar the clear blue of the heavens; and what snow yet lay upon the earth, glistened in the sunlight, like soft bosoms of some strangely brilliant ore.

Haxon's mind seemed divided between occasional glances at the pedestrians who brushed closely by, and some absorbing thought which forced itself upon his villainous, yet cool and intelligent brain.

As he neared the bridge over the Falls, at Baltimore street, these reveries were formed into low-spoken words:

"What can have become of him—Austin Burns? I know I struck deep! Yet, it can not be that he is dead, or the morning papers would have ferreted the occurrence out, and I have searched their columns in vain. Can it be that that infernal woman has taken him in her care?—that the stab was not fatal?—that she will tell him who it was aimed the blow at his life, and, when he has recovered, bring him forward to—no, no, Harold Haxon, you must not allow yourself to count upon difficulties ahead. But if she has done this, I'll find her out, and she shall be put out of the way this time, beyond a doubt! No more Locust Point failures, by the Eternal!"

"Sun, American AND Gazette!" yelled an

urchin, within a foot of his ear; "buy one, sir!"

"No," he answered, sharply; for the boy's shrill tone had startled him.

"Yet," he continued, letting his gaze fall to the pavement again; "what have I against this woman? Nothing—except that Gil Bret keeps impressing on my mind that she is my enemy, and will injure me in every way she can. If she is my enemy, then that is enough. No man or woman shall interfere with Harold Haxon, but what it shall cost them their—"

"Not so loud, Haxy," interrupted a voice.

He wheeled round as he felt a hand laid on his shoulder, and faced Gil Bret.

"Not so loud, Haxy. You musn't go on that 'ere way, or you'll git into a fryin'-pan. The fellers back to the restaurant was lookin' after you, as you was grumblin' 'bout somethin', an' one says you was crazy."

"You are punctual, Bret"—looking at his watch, which indicated ten precisely.

"Yes. Though we aren't at the place of meetin'."

Haxon looked around him. He had not paid much attention to his whereabouts, as he walked in reverie, and they now stood before the Opera House—so called—at the Falls.

"Why, I forgot myself."

"Rather. Come, we'll go back again."

"Where to?"

"Fountain Saloon."

"Calvert street?"

"Yes."

"Too far, Bret. Some place nearer."

"Jus' the place. Tables an' curtains. We kin whisper, an' have it soft. We mus' have a talk. I'm purty near bu'st in stamps, an' we've got to make a raise. Ole woman's cleared out, Lord knows where, an' the bank's flat. Understan'?"

"No money?" put uneasily.

"Not much on't, now I tell you. If we don't make a raise, we'll go for rooms at Bayview, in a month—"

"What has happened?"

"Just you come along, now, an' let up till we git where we kin talk. You've got somethin' else to make a row 'bout, up to ole Forde's house, to-day. No talk now."

As the two passed the market, at the Maryland Institute, elbowing their way through the throng that talked, idled and jostled before the pavement stands, a woman, standing in the east archway, seemed suddenly surprised at their appearance, and, evidently, did not wish to be seen by them, for she drew back, instead of advancing, as was her first intention, and turning to a large, powerful man who accompanied her, and who was carrying a large market-basket, she hurriedly said something.

He flashed a quick glance upon Haxon and Bret, and then, summoning a colored boy who lounged near, he gave the lad his basket, and started in pursuit of the two villains.

The woman was she of the black garments, and the man to whom she spoke was Wat Blake.

She looked after the three, until they were lost to view in the crowd, and then, with the boy in tow, took a car going west.

When Harold Haxon and his companion were safely ensconced behind the falling curtains, at the Fountain Saloon, the first said:

"Now tell me what's the matter? What do you mean by saying we have no more money? Only yesterday you told me your purse, though reduced to only fifty 'greens,' would contain five thousand more within a week—"

"Cheese it!" interrupted the bruiser: "wait till we git rid of this 'ere moke," and then he added, addressing the grinning mulatto, whose bar-stained face appeared at that juncture:

"Two fries—sharp! Lightnin', now! Now I'll tell you"—settling himself back and facing his companion. "When I said I'd have five thousan' more purty soon, I meant it. But, you see, there aren't nothin' more uncertain in life, than countin' on exactly what ain't on hand. See? As you an' me never lived together, you don't know what's goin' on where I live; an' I ain't goin' to tell you, because I have to tell you some of the secrets of my life. See?—sides 'tain't none of your bizness. But there's somethin' happened 'at I'll knock my ideas of that five thousan' into a scrape wuss 'an the Jones Falls committee question!"

"You mean to say that it has slipped through your fingers?"

"T—h—a—t's it."

"Da—"

"Jes' so! Now 'ithout much jaw-bu'stin', we've got to git stamps, 'cause, I tell you, they're pizen to vagrants here in Baltimore, they are—an' I kin tell you just where we're a-goin' to git them stamps!"

"To procure money!" and Haxon's face brightened.

"Sh!" admonished Bret.

The waiter's return with the oysters checked their conversation. When they were once more alone, Haxon inquired:

"How are we to obtain this money!—and what do you want me to do?"

"Just pitch inter these 'ere fellers, an' satisfy your in'ards," said Bret, himself setting the example by an immediate attack upon the bivalves.

Gil Bret, was Haxon's banker. He furnished funds, without receiving deposits—except when Haxon was favored by one of those miraculous runs of luck, which so very few fighters of "the tiger" experience during their professional career; and on these occasions, the lucre, or "greens," was divided.

When informed by Bret, in the blunt manner we have seen, that the bank was now "flat," the announcement startled him; for he must have money, in order to maintain his position as a gentleman of leisure and wealth—which position he had gained through some sharp maneuver.

His uneasiness, however, at their apparent penniless state, was banished when Bret, his guardian, his companion, his providing genius, informed him that there was a "haul" within easy grasp; but he knew too well the nature of his inseparable associate, to importune for information when Bret evinced a disposition to be tardy.

So he followed, with glum resignation, and ate his oysters in silence.

"You're goin' to dine 'ith Forde this afternoon, Haxy?" said the bruiser, presently, his capacious mouth jammed with oyster, pickle and cracker, while he buttered a slice of bread, and fixed his eyes on the latter, in a studying way.

"Yes."

"Well, now, mind what I'm goin' to say—feel dry? Somethin' to drink?"

"No; never mind. Go on with what you have to say."

"Well, pay 'tention now. When you go to see the ole gentleman, you'll have a lot to talk 'bout, concernin' the gal. But when you've fixed things, an' when Miss Eola comes to understand the case precisely, then ask him—mind, sharp!—for the Black Crescent. Hal what's that?" Bret started up suddenly, looked over Haxon's shoulder, and then scrutinized the long alcove behind his own chair.

"What's the matter?"

"Well"—resuming his seat—"there ain't nothin' particularly the matter; on'y it's queer to me 'at this 'ere place should give a' echo!"

"An echo?"

"Jes' so. I heard them 'ere words echoed, as plain as if I'd said 'em over ag'in."

"The Black Crescent?"

"Yes, sir. But don't forget the words now—Black Crescent. Tell ole Forde you want that 'ere article. Tell 'im you must have it."

"I shall do so. What has that to do with our getting money?"

Bret looked at him in a peculiar way.

"You jus' do as I tell you, now, and I'll show you somethin'."

"I will obtain it."

Haxon was wondering what such a thing as that mentioned could have to do with their "sink or swim" on the tide of life; when the bruiser added, as he swallowed the last mouthful.

"But there's one thing 'bout it, Haxy."

"Well?"

"You mustn't insist too much on havin' the article, or maybe we'll find our plans a-goin' up in an explosion!"

"I must not insist? Explain."

"The ole cuss sets a good deal by that 'ere crescent, an' it's all 'cause he's full o' superstition o' the wust kind. You know, for I have told you, how superstitious he is: 'cause, if he warn't superstitious, what d' you s'pose he'd care 'bout that 'ere proph'cy?—an' that curse? Hey? I tell you, it'll be a hard pull to get the crescent; an' if he won't hand it over, why you needn't keep pokin' steady at it, like the feller does at fillin' the glasses 'ith ice an' water in the councils. Understan'?"

"I do."

"Come on, then. You jus' do as best you

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kin, an' we'll have a puff purse, 'ithout no trouble. That's all. Got that document 'ith you, 'at we're a usin' ag'in' Forde?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me. I'll keep it. Meet me at the Golden Gates to-night at eight o'clock, an' let me know how you've made out."

Haxon took a soiled paper from his pocket-book, and handed it over to the bruiser.

Gil Bret settled for the treat, and the two separated at the door outside.

The bruiser walked down to the wharves, and interested himself with looking at the shipping—a bootblack retiring before him, with a handful of tobacco-juice as a reward for his importunities.

When the two left the Fountain saloon, they did not notice the tall form of Wat Blake, as that personage stood, with his back to the stove, facing the rear entrance.

When they were gone, he left, also, and, as he walked along, he muttered:

"So Gil Bret, shrewd scoundrel! is after the Black Crescent. How lucky that Bertha saw them passing the market! Bret has the paper, eh? These rascals shall not long prosper in their power over Forde, if I can prevent it. They meet at Patterson Park to-night at eight o'clock. I will be there—and I will not be alone. I must have that paper."

Thus musing and resolving, he reached Baltimore street close behind Harold Haxon, whom he had, unconsciously, been following.

CHAPTER VII.

HARNDEN FORDE FINDS THE CRESCENT SAFE; AND WHAT THAT CRESCENT WAS.

As Harnden Forde approached his daughter, his brow darkened.

He saw, by the dim light of the fire, that she was agitated, and her agitation was such that she was at a loss for speech.

Had she struck the telling blow which, beyond a doubt, proved the salvation of Wat Blake's life!—for, considering the desperate frenzy Forde was in, as he grew fearful that his plan would fail, the death of the man who was helpless in his clutches would have seemed inevitable.

She was attired in a loose wrapper, as if she had been about to retire, when suddenly, unexpectedly interrupted.

"Eola—what does this mean? Why are you here?"

He did not question her too closely at first, for, though his mind was filled with a suspicion plausible under the circumstances—viz: that it must have been his own child who struck him—still he hoped that he was mistaken, and that she had not been a witness to the fearful scene.

"Has anything happened, father?" she asked, half-recoiling before his strange appearance.

For a moment he regarded her steadily.

"How long have you been here, Eola?"

"Scarcely a second. Ah! there is blood upon your hand! Oh! tell me what has happened! Something—something—"

His head was bruised and the flesh broken. In feeling of the welt that was upon his head, the blood therefrom had stained his hand.

He quickly thrust the discolored hand from her sight.

"My child, did you strike me just now?"

"Strike you?" and the arms that had wound round his neck dropped nerveless to her side. "Strike you! Oh, father, what do you mean? I have only been here a few seconds. When I came you were arising from the floor, as though you had been lying there. I do not know what you mean. You are bloody! Something has happened. Oh, tell me what it is!"

Forde was convinced that she spoke openly and truthfully. She had never deceived him with a falsehood—she would not do it now.

"What brought you here, Eola?" evading her desire to know what had taken place.

"I was dressing, when there came a knock at my door, and a woman's voice bade me hurry. What ails you, father?"

"Nothing, nothing; speak quick!"

"Opening the door, I found a strange man and woman there. Before I could recover from my astonishment, they were gone, having told me to make haste up here; that you needed my assistance. And I came at once, fearing—"

"Which—which way did they go?" he interrupted, excitedly.

"Toward the library."

Casting off the arms that had for the second time fixed about his neck, he staggered at a pace more than a walk along the unlighted hall, down the stairs, and across to the room which was his library.

As he reached the door he heard a sound that resembled the closing of a window-sash. But when he entered the library it was deserted; all was still as the grave.

A gas-jet was burning low, which, in the silent hour of midnight, gave to the apartment a surrounding of spectral shadows.

He went straight to a desk near the window and unlocking the case, penetrated to a secret pigeon-hole, from which he drew out a yellow parchment.

"Safe! safe!" he muttered, his face brightening; "still safe. And yet I would give it them if they would be content with that alone and leave me forever. Ha! who's that?"

Eola had followed him.

"Eola, child, return to your room. Go to bed."

"But, father, oh! do tell me what has happened," continuing to advance.

"No, no; not to-night. To-morrow. Go—leave me."

She obeyed, murmuring:

"Oh! Heaven grant I may some time know what means the mystery that shrouds this house. I'll go; but I cannot sleep now," pausing in the doorway. "You'll tell me all to-morrow?"

"Yes, yes; go—go now."

But Harnden Forde spoke recklessly. His object then was to be alone. When he gave the promise he considered it forced upon him, and meant to avoid fulfillment of it.

"Yes, that's safe!" he continued to himself, and he returned the parchment to its place.

The welt upon his head was painful. Wetting his handkerchief from an ice-pitcher near him, he bathed the wounded part and turned again to his desk.

Drawing back the panel which concealed an ingeniously-contrived drawer, he drew the latter out, and gazed steadfastly down upon the Black Crescent.

It was a curious piece of workmanship—perhaps six inches long and four broad, and of most valuable composition.

The ground was pure, smooth jet, diversified with minute lines of garnet heads, and studded with diamonds at intervals of an inch; while the edging was solid gold, one-quarter of an inch deep. The top of each prong was a small crown of rubies and pearls, with delicate threads of gold and black like gauze-work intermingled. It was at least an inch and a half in thickness, and the back of the whole was one solid plate of silver. Between the two edges on the outside from point to point, was a dark hair line which might have indicated that the crescent could be laid open upon tiny concealed hinges, in the shape of a figure eight, without the joining line at the middle.

There lay the mysterious article, its many rich jewels glistening, sparkling, raying its confusion of brilliant colors in the light of the faint gas-jet, and Harnden Forde, with an indefinable expression upon his white face, stood over it, contemplating it in silence.

What Gil Bret, the "rough," wanted with this crescent we are able to infer. The valuable gems would have been a fortune to any one.

Why Wat Blake wished to secure it, we will learn anon.

Outside the library window, and almost reaching to it, was a stout grape rack. Upon the top strip of this rack, his two hands clinging to the sill, was a man.

As Harnden Forde stood there, his eyes fixed upon the crescent, another pair of eyes were watching him through the window-panes.

At last Forde closed the drawer, and as he refastened the desk, he said, slowly:

"No! No! No! I must never part with it. Great Heaven! what would be the consequences? Did not Madame Fernandez say that—that— But away with such words! Am I not miserable enough in remembering, without repeating the dark syllables? God!—is the world at large as superstitious as I am? If it is—unhappy world! It is hereditary! I have fought—oh! how I have struggled in resistance of the clammy coils! But in vain—I fear something; something continually! That horrible curse!—that dread prophecy! Ha! some one repeats them in my ear! No, no, it is my fancy. Only fancy. I wonder—if—I—am—going—MAD!" He sunk into a

chair, and the aged head bowed upon his breast. The weary, sunken eyes were fixed vacantly upon the carpet. "My poor Eola! She, before whom the proud and wealthy in our midst would go down upon their knees, if their reward was to be an approving smile!—she, who never knew a care or sorrow; beloved by all who know her; all on earth to Austin Burns— Ha! I must not think of him! He is Bertha Blake's son; my own—child! Haxon's letter said so. I dare not doubt it! And she, poor girl, knows not the abyss, over which I am tottering!—knows not that, at any moment, we may be crushed, trampled upon, shamed before the world! And I, I have wrought this state of things, through a folly of former days!—folly? it was criminal! Oh! that I could have reasoned with my nature then! Would that I had taken the hand outstretched in forgiveness three years ago!—and all might have been well."

His face was buried in his hands; a low, painful sob told that he was weeping.

The face outside the window raised higher, and assumed a stern cast; the eyes that looked in upon him seemed riveted in their gaze; while the soft wind carried away upon its wings the words:

"Remorse at last!"

Half an hour, an hour, nearly two hours slipped by. Harnden Forde moved not.

Presently, there was a slight noise at the window. If he slept, the sound aroused him, for he started up and glanced suspiciously about him. As he did so, he heard footsteps in the yard below. In another second he was at the window—and just in time to see through the gloom, a man going out at the gate.

"It must have been Wat Blake!" he exclaimed, pacing to and fro. "I have been watched! How long did he cling fast there, spying upon me? He saw me at the desk! He must have seen the certificate—the crescent! I can not leave here now, or I shall be robbed! Oh! if I could but see Bertha! Bertha—Bertha, you would forgive!"

Long, long he walked that floor and fought the drowsy god who laid a hand upon his eyelids.

Through the still night, with naught but his own heart-beatings to break the silence of the room, and no companion, save his barrowing thoughts, Harnden Forde kept his vigil; and the first gray shades of morn were creasing in through the window, when he ceased his sentry striding and pulled the bell-cord.

Early as it was, the domestics of Forde's house were stirring, and his summons was answered by the hall servant, who was greatly surprised to find his employer up and in the library at that unusual hour.

"James, go eat your breakfast, and return to me at once. I have new duties for you to perform. Your place in the hall can be done with in future."

"I hope, sir, I haven't been doin' anythin' wrong, sir?" stammered James, who did not exactly comprehend.

"No, James; I have no fault to find. But, do as I tell you—eat your breakfast and return to me, here, as soon as possible."

Wondering what his employer could have in view, that should take him from his easy position in the hall, the servant departed; and Forde, worn out, and sick in mind, threw himself, with a deep sigh, into a chair, to wait.

James returned shortly.

Harnden Forde took a small revolver from the top of the desk, and, laying one hand upon the servant's arm, he said:

"Take this."

James took the weapon, and stared in a bewildered manner.

"I did not sleep last night, James. I have kept a lonely watch here, walking with my weary limbs, like a sentry who guards his camp fire."

The serving man opened his eyes wider, but said nothing. Forde transferred his hold to the other's wrist, and, as his listener winced at the touch of the icy cold fingers, he continued:

"You have been in my service for years. I feel that I can trust you. Listen: there is t'at in my desk the loss of which would send me to my grave in misery! I wish you to remain here and watch—watch that desk! I am liable to be robbed at any moment, day or night; and no one is to enter this library!"

The last words were peculiarly emphasized, and James stared the more.

"Guard my interests, and I will increase

your pay. Do you understand me? Will you do this?"

"Well, I will that, sir. I'll do whatever you say, sir. And there won't anybody come in while I'm here!"

"Remember! do not leave the room for a moment, unless I am here to take your place. Guard my interests, James; guard them well. I will arrange to have your meals brought you."

Forde, having spoken these instructions, withdrew.

"Well, now!" exclaimed the guard, looking after him, "I do wonder what on this earth's the matter with 'im? He's been actin' mighty queer these past days a few. An' Lord! he don't look nothin' like he did when I first came here! Poor man—ah! he's gettin' old, au' I s'pect he's onwell, or somethin'," and shaking his head, James sat down to keep his watch.

Harnden Forde retired to his room, to seek a few hours' repose. Human nature could not bear up under the tax that had been put upon him within the last two days, and notwithstanding the maze of thought, fear, anxiety which rushed upon his turbid brain, his head no sooner touched the pillow than he slept.

It was after noon when he arose and partook of a light repast.

Slumber had been sweet to him. It was a forgetfulness of the shadows that encompassed his existence.

His return to wakefulness was like re-entering a sphere whose air was misery, and the landscape dreary, bleak with ill-foreboding.

The groan from his lips as his eyes opened to the day of the busy world, contained more than words to speak his utter wretchedness.

Eola had waited for him in the front parlor a long while.

When he entered she advanced to meet him.

"Father, are you not better this morning?" presenting her ripe lips for the accustomed kiss.

"In body, my child, I am well enough. But in mind, ah! can never be well—never! Look at me!"

Eola shuddered. She had looked. The strange, unreadable glance of those eyes—the ghastly hue of the face, frightened her, for she knew not what it meant.

"Do I look improved?" And as a sickly smile for a moment twitched the corners of his mouth, she shuddered again.

"Come," she said, "sit by the window. The warm sunshine may benefit you."

He shook his head sadly, but did as she requested.

"Now, father, tell me—for you have promised! What is it that weighs upon your mind? Explain this mystery. I must know. Remember, I have much at stake. Austin Burns is—"

"No, no; forget him. You cannot marry him. Never!"

"Then I insist upon a full explanation. I demand it!" her lovely face crimsoning as she spoke.

"See," he said; "here is Harold Haxon ascending the steps—"

"That man!"
She bit her lip, and one of her dainty, slippers feet patted the soft carpet in an impatient way. Evidently—from her tone, from her manner—Harold Haxon was a most undesirable acquaintance to her, and a deep silence reigned as father and daughter hearkened to the servant admitting the visitor.

A few moments later Haxon, smiling and bowing, was ushered into their presence.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHO DEALT THE BLOW.

To return to Austin Burns.

He had not long to wait for his new-found friend. When she came back, she was accompanied by a physician—a tall, spare-limbed individual, with hooked nose and peculiarly grave countenance, which, with twinkling eyes and humorous poise, was far from disagreeable in expression.

"There is your patient, Doctor Cauley," pointing to the young man, who arose upon their entrance, and steadied himself by holding to the back of the chair, for it seemed to Austin that in every minute his friend had been gone he had grown weaker, and at that moment he felt very faint.

A scrutinizing glance at Austin's face, a

stroke of the smooth chin, and the physician said:

"Exactly, um! Going to faint, may be. Keep up, sir; keep up. Retain your pins and shut your mouth. Now, lay down."

With their assistance, Austin was fixed comfortably upon the sofa, and the man of medicine proceeded to attend to the wound.

He screwed his thin features into an ugly frown while examining the cut, and, nodding to the woman in black, uttered, briefly:

"Must bathe it. Tepid water. Got a sponge?" and as she hurried after the desired articles, he continued, to Austin:

"Retain your position and keep quiet. Bad wound, this. Feel weak, eh?"

"Very, sir."

"Retain your senses and say nothing. Now then."

When the water and sponge were brought, he began to bathe and then dress the wound. The blade had not sunk deep, but the flesh was horribly torn.

"Doctor, is it dangerous?"

"Now, my dear madam, everything is dangerous. It's dangerous to eat, for fear we overload the stomach. It's dangerous to drink, even water, for fear we strangle. It's dangerous to live, for fear we may die; and there's more danger in being born than there is in dying. Permit me to remark, madam, that 'in the midst of existence we are liable to become defunct.' Easiest thing in the world to die, if—"

"But this wound, doctor? Please inform me if it is likely to prove fatal."

"Um! Well, if he retains his wits, and promises to keep clear of politics for the balance of his life, he may come out of this all right. Nurse him well, nurse him well; it won't hurt him."

"I am deeply interested in him, Dr. Cauley—very deeply. His life is precious to me. Say he will live."

"Let him try. Retain his composure and talk very little. I'll come and dine with him in a week."

"I understand," with a sigh of relief. "He will live. You can not imagine what a load of anxiety is taken from my mind. But, Doctor Cauley, will you now do me a favor?"

"Retain my character and win your esteem? Certainly."

"Will you remain here with Mr. Burns until about three o'clock?"

"Hey?" pausing in his work and arching his brows, as he looked at her inquiringly.

"Will you remain here, with Mr. Burns, until I return? I must go away; will be gone, probably, until three o'clock."

"In the morning? This A. M?"

"Yes."

"Necessary?"

"Very. I can not explain, as my business is private, as well as important. If there is an extra charge, do not hesitate to include it in the bill."

"Um! Retain the premises and keep awake all night. Certainly. If you are not back by the hour named, I shall begin to get—breakfast. Expect to see the table set, and tea-kettle boiling," with this he turned again to his task.

Austin Burns was looking at his strange friend, in a puzzled way. There was something about her which had not impressed itself upon his mind when he first saw her face; something which seemed to strike the chords of memory with a familiar, yet inexplicable harmony. Was it some dream that had been his, in which he beheld the sad features and the deep, black eyes looking down upon him, as they were at that moment? or was it the new life of a buried recollection which, through a marvelous retentiveness, his brain created, to fill him with uncertain thoughts?

It was not an unhandsome face; perhaps, in youth, its outlines were penciled by a wand whose merest touch was beauty. But now, its expression was sad and worn to the unmistakable lines of unhappiness, though it was full of kindness, beaming with tenderness, and as their eyes met, he strove his best—in vain—to place the picture before him.

"Doctor Cauley will stay here, Mr. Burns—let me call you Austin!"

"You may," he answered, still regarding her steadily; for something told him she had a right to the privilege she asked.

"Doctor Cauley will remain with you, Austin, until I get back, and will attend to your comfort. I am very sorry I must leave you;

but, there is that demanding my attention which I can not neglect. Be of good cheer. Good-by!"

"Ahem! Retain your senses and listen to me," interrupted Cauley. "This young man must have something to quiet him—not eternally, but for a little while. He's unstrung, madam—I say unstrung. Now, if you're going to whisk yourself off, who gets the medicine?"

"I think you'll find exactly what you want, in that closet beneath the stairs. The medicine you gave brother Wat when he was feverish. There are many bottles there; but all are labeled."

Having thus relieved the physician of his perplexity, she departed.

"How familiar!" exclaimed Austin, feebly; "I am sure I have seen her before."

"Um! Retain your ideas and close your lips. Of course you've seen her before. Everybody has seen everybody in the course of a lifetime, or somebody that looks like he, she, or it, more or less. What you want, is quietude. Where did you get this cut? Been fighting?"

"Something I avoid, sir, and have never yet disgraced myself by engaging in a public brawl. The wound was given me on the Fayette street bridge, to night, by some one who evidently meant murder. I never knew, until to-night, that I had enemies."

"Pooh! Everybody has enemies. I've been fighting mine ever since I played top, at school. Retain your surmises and forget your enemies, for the present, while I complete this little job."

The woman in black sped away from the house, back toward the bridge at the Falls.

She had reached the west end of the bridge, when she caught sight of two men who were just then passing the gas-lamp at the fence. They were coming toward her; the features of both were easily discernible.

"Ha! It is Harold Haxon and his ally, Gil Bret. What are they coming here for?"

The spot whereon she stood was very dark; no one was near to detect her movements, and she crouched down, close by the rail, to watch the comers.

The two men halted on the bridge. What followed we have seen.

When they departed, she continued swiftly on to her destination, which was the house of Harnden Forde on Eutaw street.

Reaching here, she made her way through the narrow alley, and inserting her arm in the large, round hole near the latch of the gate, she slipped the bolt.

The library window was before her, and the stout grape-rack offered means of reaching it.

"I may venture," she thought. "It is almost time for Wat to be here."

But few women can ascend a ladder with ease of mind and body, and it was with no little difficulty she made her way to the top.

The back windows of other houses in the vicinity were darkened. No wakful eyes marked her actions, and, after much exertion, she reached the top strip.

To her surprise the window was unlatched; and, as her heart fluttered at the boldness of her undertaking, she cautiously raised the sash.

"I will not close it," moving noiselessly toward the door. "There is no knowing in what haste I may have to pass out again. Ah! bark!"

There was a scarce audible footstep on the stairs, so sudden came the sound, that she paused, undecided, midway across the room.

But the one outside—who was Harnden Forde seeking the room of his strange and unwelcome guest—continued past.

With a few quick, silent steps, she reached the door, and found it barely closed. To open it, slightly, was the work of a moment, and, by the dim rays of a small burner which lighted the second floor, she saw Forde, with the significant ropes in his hand, just turning at the landing.

The ropes, the cat-like tread, with which he was ascending the stairs, at once struck her.

Could she have obtained a glimpse of his face?

But sight of the ropes, especially, filled her mind with suspicions.

In the corner, by her, stood a thick cane of heavy, unyielding wood. Almost involuntarily she grasped this and stole after him, moving no less like a specter than he.

He led her to the third story; then he dis-

appeared into the room where Wat Blake slumbered, unconscious of the frail thread upon which hung his life.

Exercising great caution, she advanced toward the room, and had almost reached it, when Forde's first words fell upon her ears.

"Wake up, Wat Blake! Wake up, and meet your doom!"

"Great heaven! he is killing Wat!" Heedless now of caution she ran to the doorway.

The sight she saw fairly brought her heart to her throat.

Forde was striving to wring information from the lips of the helpless man, whom he was strangling!

Had not Forde been so wrapt in his inhuman work, he would have heard the step of the rescuer, behind him.

Closing her hands upon the cane, with all her strength, she poised it above her head.

True to its aim, it cut the air, and Forde lay insensible at her feet.

"Quick, quick, Wat! Merciful heaven! What an escape!"

She untied the rope which bound him, and he, choking—half blind, gasping for breath, staggered to his feet.

With all the enduring iron of his strong frame, he could not recover himself at once, and weak, dizzy, faint, the room spinning round before his hazed vision, like a vortex of inconceivable things, he was led, or rather dragged, away.

"Come, Wat! Oh! hurry. He may recover at any moment. Come—the crescent!"

As they passed a room on the second floor, where a light shone through the transom of the door, she paused to knock.

Eola appeared.

"Harnden Forde is in the third story, and needs assistance. Go to him," and without saying more, they hurried on to the library.

Wat Blake drank deeply of the ice-pitcher, and as the pure, refreshing beverage infused a new life into his body, his first words were:

"Too late, Bertha—too late! We cannot get the crescent to-night. But it is in there—in that desk. I am sure of it. Mark it well."

"Oh! no, no—not too late! Do not say it is too late!" she cried. "Let us force it open!"

"I tell you it is too late! We must wait now till some more favorable time. Hark!"

Some one was even then rapidly descending the stairs.

"I told you so," he added. "Be quick, now! Out at the window."

"But are you strong enough?"

"Yes, yes; hurry. There is no time for words. I do not wish to encounter this man now, or I may do him harm"—frowning and glancing toward the door.

When he had followed her and closed the sash, he said:

"Go home now, sister. I shall remain here. Perhaps I may yet procure the crescent; for it is in that desk. Ah! it is Forde himself; see, he enters. He is at the desk. There—go now; make no noise in getting down."

Reluctantly she left him, and turned homeward.

Wat Blake watched—waited. He fairly raised his shoulders above the sill to see better, when Forde opened the drawer in which lay the mysterious crescent.

"Perchance he will leave the library shortly, and I may secure it after all."

But he was doomed to disappointment. Forde seated himself, and the agonizing thoughts which dwelt within him were depicted thoroughly upon his face, and noted by the watcher.

"Can it be that he sleeps?" Blake asked himself, as the moments flew by, and still Forde sat there, still and silent. "If so, I can pick his pocket of the key, and get the crescent and the certificate ere he wakes!"

But an attempt to raise the sash proved the contrary to his hopes; and as Forde started from his seat, Blake dropped to the ground and ran out at the gate—but not in time to escape being seen by the man who would have been his murderer.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

THE woman in black, upon returning to her home, found Doctor Cauley in an easy-chair, dozing before the fire.

A glance at the lounge told her that Austin

was sleeping, and she addressed the physician in a whisper.

"How does he seem, doctor?"

"Ay—ho—um—m!" yawning and looking at her in a quizzical way. "Retains his life and goes to sleep in ease—see? You're back sooner than you said. It's now the bewitching hour of morning's night, when burglars prowl and—You know it's one of our 'systems,' madam, in Baltimore to leave front-doors unlocked?"

"Yes"—quietly laying off her hat and shawl. "I expected to be detained much longer. You are satisfied, then, that the wound is not serious?"

"Pardon me; but you know how it is yourself—we're all liable to stop breathing at any moment; and this young man must take care of the sore cut on his shoulder. Let him retain his common sense, and not marry. What's his name?"

"Burns—Austin Burns."

She came forward from the lounge, where she had stood for a few seconds, looking down into the young man's face, and drew up a chair beside the blunt but kind-hearted Doctor Cauley.

"Who did you say?" he asked quickly.

"Austin Burns. Do you know him?"

"Know him? Retain your judgment, madam, and see if I look like a jacka-ninny, I mean. Of course I know him. At least, I attended his uncle, when that good gentleman died—which he *would* do, despite all the medicine I gave him, and I then heard quite a romantic story."

"Ah!"

"Certainly. This party wasn't his, Austin Burns's, uncle, after all. See? A waif, a basket arrangement, a vestibule sensation. Well, in this basket was—Tired, madam? You look pale. Have a glass of water?"

"No, no; mere fatigue. Go on, doctor."

"Well, in this basket was twenty thousand dollars! Where the child came from, who or what it was, nobody in that family could imagine. I was the family physician, and I got into the secrets of the occurrence. See?"

"You knew of the helpless infant then?" and she leaned forward in her chair, putting the question with such abruptness that the doctor pushed his own chair from her and faced her in a half-startled manner, saying:

"Not exactly. I knew the secret of the family having adopted the child; that's all, madam. And I knew the gentleman who adopted it was a most honorable party. When he died, I knew that young Burns, then grown to be a man, came into possession of a round fortune—or a square bank account, whichever you choose. Rumor has reached my ears of an engagement, too, between Burns and Eola Forde, daughter of Harnden Forde, a gentleman well known and respected in this community, etc., etc., etc."

"Respected!" she murmured with sarcasm.

"Yes, that's what I said—now, my dear madam, you look as if you were smeared with whitewash! Pardon me. Really. Have a glass of water."

"And that is all you know of Austin Burns?"

"Positively the sum total of my information. Retain my reputation as truth-teller by making affidavit to that effect."

"Did you ever hear of one Harold Haxon?" she inquired after a brief pause in their conversation.

"Think I have. Can't say for certain."

"I may tell you, doctor, that Austin Burns was stabbed to-night by this Haxon, and the incentive to the foul act was jealousy."

Doctor Cauley opened mouth and eyes, and she went on to detail the circumstances of the existing enmity on Haxon's part.

"He wishes to remove Austin from his path," she said in conclusion; "and he has a strong ally in a villainous wretch named Gil Bret."

"The rascal! We must catch him—both of them—send them to the penitentiary!"

"No. Not yet. What I have told you, you will retain sacredly private. The time has not come yet; and I am managing matters. I shall consider you pledged to say nothing to any one of our conversation."

"You are a most singular woman!" he exclaimed.

"And you a man of bold opinions!"

"Right!" and the way he scraped his throat and the soberness of his utterance indicated that he considered the compliment well placed.

"You must be tired, doctor."

"Right again. I am 'tired now and sleepy too.' As you are here, I'll go. Don't let the young man sleep too much. I found the medicine in the closet. I'll call to-morrow, or to-day, again."

"One moment."

"Yours to command."

He was squirming into his overcoat while speaking, and now, slapping his hat on his head, he paused in the doorway.

"We shall not be here to-morrow."

"Sha'n't? Why?"

"We have to move. When you call to see your patient, let it be No. —, South Charles street. It will not hurt Austin, if moved carefully, will it?"

"Do it easy—very easy. All right. I'll come. Good-night," and he whisked out at the front door almost before he had concluded speaking.

When she re-entered the parlor, Austin was awake.

"Water!" he said, faintly. "Give me some water."

Having cooled his feverish lips with that most grateful of beverages—than which the world never knew a purer, sweeter, or more healthful—he sunk again into a calm sleep; while the woman in black bent over him and murmured in a low voice:

"And he is the affianced of Eola!—of my child! Who more worthy of her? Who could make her more happy? Sleep on, Austin; you have a friend by you whose aim is your happiness, and whose power shall yet destroy the enemies that surround you!"

When morning bled the azure vault with its first soft rays of gold and crimson, Wat Blake entered the house.

"Did you succeed, Wat?" she questioned, eagerly.

"No, sister; but take courage. Though it be my fault that we have failed, you shall soon thank me for my zeal. For I promise you the crescent shall be restored before a month goes by."

"Your words give me strength, Wat," but her voice was sad as she spoke.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, discovering Austin,

"who is this?" "Did I not tell you last night when I left you on Eutaw street that Harold Haxon meant mischief? See! it was almost a murder. The base wretch fled when I confronted him, as well he might, when he thought his hand had long ago helped in giving me to the fishes," and she narrated fully the particulars concerning Austin's presence there.

"For our poor, wronged niece's sake, dear Wat, we must assist him."

"Ay, with my own life, I'll help him."

Blake retired to his room, while the woman in black continued to watch her charge.

It was after a few hours' refreshing sleep that he rejoined her.

A light repast was spread in the dining-room, and during the meal she acquainted him with the necessity of removal.

"Now, that they know where he is, Wat, they may make another attempt upon his life. We must leave at once—to-day."

Upon this point they agreed.

The young man was awake when they re-entered the parlor, and having attended to his wants, she said:

"This is my brother, Austin—Wat Blake."

He did not know his real weakness until he raised his hand to meet the friendly grip that waited him.

"Tell me, is my wound fatal?"

"No; not if you are quiet. Do not go to sleep again if you can help it; but, be resigned while we leave you for a little while. There is no danger to you here, in broad daylight."

"I am afraid of nothing," he interrupted, smiling faintly.

"But you are weak. We will not be gone long. Here is water, beside you."

Wat Blake went to order a cab, after which he joined his sister at the market.

When he had started in pursuit of Haxon and Bret, as already noticed, she took a car going west, soon leaving that and entering a car of the Blue Line.

Alighting in the neighborhood of the Jewish Temple, she sought a neat-looking boarding-house on Charles street, and dismissed the boy who accompanied her.

A pull at the door bell was answered by the proprietress herself—a short, broad, healthy-faced, garrulous old lady, with whom she was evidently well acquainted.

"Why, laws sakes! Who'd 'a' thought to see you again, Mrs. Wernich," she exclaimed, bustling about to procure her visitor a chair. "I thought you'd gone from Baltimore ever so long ago! Where on earth do you come from? And how've you been? And what's *been* the matter, eh?"

"My dear Mrs. Lenner, I've scarcely time to answer all your inquiries just now; but I'll be with you this evening, and you may question me all you please. Listen now—"

"Laws sakes! Are you goin' to come and live with me again? Well, there's what a funny, funny world! I was tellin' Jacob, last night, 'at I s'posed you was 'way up in New Hampshire by this time; and now, here you are—well, well! But then, it's such a funny world, you know? And it was just night, when here comes a poor little angel of a critter on the arm of a policeman, huntin' for a night's lodgin'! She's up-stairs, now bless her heart! And—"

"But, Mrs. Lenner, listen to me. Have you three vacant rooms?"

"I have, indeed; 'cause there's two on 'em been idle a month, 'sides the garret, 'at this darlin', angel of a critter has took only for a day or two; and one of my boarders left today, to go to Washin'ton, and— But what on this earth do you want *three* for?"

"I have found my brother, Mrs. Lenner, and he is with me. Then there is a young man—"

"A young man!"

"Yes. I knew you could accommodate us in rooms, but feared your humble table would not be equal to two more hearty and unexpected eaters, at noon, so I brought you a basket of goodies. No questions, now, if you please; I will explain all this evening. Have the rooms fixed for us. We are coming at once. Now I must go—"

"My! my! my! Why, you ain't hardly sat down yet!"

"Good-day, my dear Mrs. Lenner. Have the rooms ready."

She left the house, and hastened toward the cars.

Already too much time had elapsed since leaving Austin, and she was anxious for his comfort.

When she reached her home, Wat. Blake was there, seated beside, and conversing with, Austin Burns.

"Well, dear Wat, you followed them?" in an undertone, and drawing him aside.

"Yes."

"Where to?"

"To a saloon, where, thinking they were alone, they discussed their situation. The leather bag given you by Louise Ternor, was a prize Gil Bret had counted on obtaining. At least, I judge so; for the ruffian told Haxon, that if they did not procure money immediately they were penniless."

"Ah! this is news. But, what else?"

"They have hit upon a plan to supply their wants. Haxon is to obtain the Black Crescent!"

"No! no! no!" she cried; "he must not get it! Oh! Wat, this must be prevented!"

"Never fear, sister. In the first place, we know he will not part with it. That accursed superstition of his is too strong. Haxon and Bret meet at the Golden Gates to-night at eight o'clock. Bret has the paper which gives them power over Forde. What that paper is, I know not; but, I will have it before to-morrow!"

"Yes, yes, Wat, obtain it. But, oh! do you think the crescent is safe?"

"I do— Ah! there's the cab. How do you feel now, Burns?"

"Better—stronger; but, still very weak," replied Austin.

"Well, cheer now; here's the cab at the door, and we must get you into it. Then we'll soon have you in a comfortable bed."

Austin was seated, easily, in the cab, and when Blake had securely fastened the house, the vehicle, with its three occupants, moved slowly away.

Reaching Mrs. Lenner's, that lady learned, for the first time, that the young man was injured in some way, and Jacob, her husband, was brought, running, to their assistance.

While carrying Austin up-stairs—scarcely permitting his feet to touch the steps—they encountered a shrieking form upon the first landing, and, with an exclamation of surprise, the woman in black paused abruptly.

"Marian Mead!"

She it was; and, as she heard that voice, she sprung forward and threw her arms around the other's neck.

"Oh! are you here? I'm so glad! I know you are my friend."

The woman in black was about to speak, when she heard Austin Burns cry out in feeble tones:

"Blake! Blake! there's Eola! I'd know her dear voice wherever I heard it! Call her to me! I must see her!"

CHAPTER X.

A VILLAIN'S WOOING.

HAROLD HAXON was smiling as he paused before Harnden Forde and Eola.

But his eyes flashed a covert glance, first at Forde, to note the effect of his visit, and then at Eola, to feast, for a moment, on her loveliness.

The villain's reception was not very cordial. By the fair girl he was disliked; by Forde he was dreaded; and as the latter returned the salutation of his visitor, he said, in icy tones:

"Mr. Haxon, we are pleased to see you."

"Mr. Haxon, I hope you are in excellent health," and with these words, Eola resumed her seat, her gaze fixed upon something in the street which appeared more interesting than the studied gallantry Haxon brought to reply. Advancing to Forde, he whispered:

"You know you lied in saying you were pleased to see me! Nothing would gladden your heart more than to see me hanged!" Then aloud:

"You were expecting me to-day?"

"Yes."

"And you, Miss Forde?"—drawing up a chair—"are you not more agreeable to your other friends than to me?"

"Perhaps."

"I fear you are in an ill-humor."

As she vouchsafed no rejoinder, he added:

"I think you might be more entertaining with an intimate acquaintance like myself. Come, let me hear you speak—"

"Have you neither eyes nor ears, that you cannot judge how distasteful it is to me to converse with you? I did not wish to be too rude; but if you were at all an educated gentleman, you would have understood my desires from the first!"

"Forde, acquaint your daughter with the fact that this thing will not do! Give her to understand that she must look upon me otherwise than she has been accustomed to, ever since my first visit. I am tired of this. I will not be trifled with, even to satisfy the whims of a foolish girl." The words were short, sharp, quick; and, as Forde trembled beneath the serpent glitter of the eyes that fixed threateningly upon him, he said:

"My child!"

"Stop, father; what does Mr. Haxon mean by that tone! I am not used to hearing such from our visitors."

"Eola—"

"By the Powers! tell Eola what I am here for!" exclaimed Haxon; and the man over whose head he held a razored steel, liable to fall, strike, annihilate with one dread sweep, said, falteringly:

"My child, you must receive Mr. Haxon as—in—more—he is to be—"

"Mr. Haxon, explain this," she demanded, spiritedly. "What is there between you and father? Tell me, sir."

"Shall I tell her?"

"Do!—dol" groaned Forde, avoiding his child's gaze, for he had not courage to look her in the face.

"Then I will. Eola—"

"Miss Forde, if you please."

"No, Eola."

The warm blood crimsoned her cheeks; but, before she could speak again, he went on:

"I have not been blind to the fact that, ever since the first moment of our acquaintance, you have looked upon me with open, positive indifference."

She bowed an acquiescence.

"Therefore, I am not much surprised that you met my recent proposal of marriage, through your father, with, I must say, contempt. And I suppose a similar proposition, if made now, would be as promptly rejected."

"Undoubtedly, sir."

"Yes. But, Eola Forde, I am about to make another offer—"

"Save yourself the trouble."

"Because it is useless?" smiling sardonically.

"Can I be more plain?"

"No, you cannot. But"—hissing the words between his teeth, and his features reddening as he spoke—"you have now to learn that I do not come like a lover on bended knee. I love—love deeply. The object of that love is yourself. You must become my wife!"

"Sir—"

"Ay, must! Tell ber, Forde, that when I say 'must,' I mean it in its fullest sense."

Eola looked from one to the other of the two in amazement. Haxon was acting strangely, with a mysterious air of command and intolerable presumption—this she saw, and also, that her father cowered, almost helpless, at the extreme end of the sofa. Why did he not strike down her insulter?

"Mr. Haxon," she found voice to say, "tell me—"

"Call me Harold."

"Never!—if death were the penalty of refusal. Never! Tell me how you dare use such language? What is your meaning? You have overstepped the utmost boundaries; but I forget it in demanding an explanation, for I would know what your words are prompted by!"

"Forde, tell your daughter she must become my wife."

The blood was mantling and reeding from her transparent temples, and her bosom heaved with excitement.

"Eola, my child, you must marry Mr. Haxon; you—must!"

"Never! Never!" she cried, starting up. "Marry him" her blue eyes lighting with a resentful fire, the finely-chiseled nostrils dilating, and her lovely face glowing in the scarlet of insult's creation—"marry him! Must! You are mad! No!—sooner the grave of a suicide! Sooner a slow death by torture! Sooner any thing than become his wife! I loathe, despise, hate him!" and with hasty steps she left them, ere the tears of anger and wounded pride should weaken her in the presence of one for whom contempt, abhorrence, disgust, would not adequately express her feelings.

Forde sat with head bowed—silent. Haxon moved restlessly in his chair. Eola's words cut like sword-thrusts, and boded ill for his prospects of making her his wife.

The power he wielded, and which was intended to crown his plot with ultimate success, must be exercised to its utmost in forcing the close alliance of the father, ere the daughter would comprehend the necessity of her sacrifice.

"Well, Forde, this is a bad beginning."

The reply was a low moan.

"Now, mark well, sir—I will have no more of this. Considering that Eola is in such a devilish humor, I'll wait until to-morrow, when I shall call again; and see to it that she receives me as her future husband."

"Harold Haxon, have pity. My child does not love you—"

"I should say she didn't!"

"And I fear I cannot govern her in this step."

"But you must! I have sworn to have her for my own, and I am determined that no combination on earth shall thwart my object."

"But if I fail?"

"If—you—fail—then I have a paper which may teach you what it is to fail!"

Forde's head drooped again upon his breast, and a heavy sigh escaped his lips.

At this juncture the silver tinkle of an electric bell was heard, and, struggling to his feet, Forde said:

"Come—to dinner."

Haxon nodded his glossy locks and followed to the dining-hall.

Eola did not join them at table, for, had we been able to look into her boudoir, we should have seen her bereft of that spirit which had sustained her in the presence of her rude suitor, her face suffused with tears.

The meal concluded, Forde and Haxon returned to the parlor, and the latter inaugurated conversation at once by saying:

"I regret to see you looking so unwell, Mr. Forde. You do not wear the face that has been your wont."

"You may regret my condition and you may not. You know it is yourself that makes me what I appear—an invalid in mind and body."

"I?"

"Yes, sir, you," and Forde seemed to gather

new strength as he added, emotionally: "Harold Haxon, are you a man? Have you none of those attributes which constitute the merciful in what God has created in His image? What are you doing? How are you grinding me beneath your heel? What dog am I? animals is more a slave—whipped, kicked, spit upon—than I am, at your hands! Answer these questions and let your conscience say whether it is strange that Harnden Ford, should have altered, when his actions are controlled by the will of a villain such as you!"

At these last words, Haxon's face flushed, and the glistening eyes told well his easily-ignited passion; but he restrained himself, forced back the hot retort which sprung to his lips, and, assuming an exterior of unwonted calmness, said, as he played carelessly with his gold toothpick:

"Tut! tut! it is hardly appropriate, you know, to appeal to a man's conscience—you, of all persons! Don't you think it would have been better to ask if one villain ought not to go his way, and let another alone? I do."

"Cease, sir."

"But, then, you will admit, if I am a villain, it is so *genteelly* characteristic as to defy detection. Moreover, with all my villainy, I have never been guilty of *f—*"

"Step—"

"You know what I would say!"

"Yes, yes; do not speak it."

"Very well. I have never done that. You have. Let it suffice that I hold undeniable proofs; and, once exposed, if you don't go to the penitentiary, you will, at least, be branded as unfit to enter decent society! Now, after this, let me again caution you that it will cost you heavily to 'fail' in bringing Eola to accept my offer of marriage. She must be mine within one month."

"A month?"

"Yes. One month from this date, Eola Forde must be Mrs. Harold Haxon. After that is over I will destroy—"

"The paper?" Forde bent forward, eagerly.

"Yes, I will then destroy the paper. Let the knowledge of my promise to that effect be an incentive to the execution of your task."

"I shall do my best."

"And not dare to fail!" added Haxon, forcibly.

Conversation lacked vivacity, and threatened to cease altogether, when Harold Haxon uttered the prelude to a thunderbolt which was about to crash upon Forde.

"I have a favor to ask," he said. "Will you grant me one?"

"I never walk the streets blindfolded, nor do I buy goods until I know their quality; therefore, it is rash to promise at the asking, particularly when dealing with—"

"We'll do without any other compliment, if you please. The favor I ask is simple. You have an article in your house which I desire very much to possess."

"Name it, sir."

"The Black Crescent!"

Sculptor never yet chiseled a face like Harnden Forde's; though like a statue of marble he sat bolt upright, white and rigid, his sunken eyes riveted upon the speaker.

At the same instant, in the hall, a low voice echoed:

"The Black Crescent!" and Eola bounded, noiselessly, up the stairs.

CHAPTER XI.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

WHEN Austin Burns cried out upon hearing Marian Mead's voice, good Mrs. Lenner, who was following close behind her husband, Wat Blake and their wounded charge, shook her head and sighed:

"Ah, me! poor young man, he's not in his right mind. He must be hurt bad—"

"Stop, Blake," interrupted Austin; "I tell you to wait. There's Eola—dear girl—I must see her. Do call her to me."

"No, Burns; you are mistaken. There's nobody in this house that you know. Come, gently now."

"But I am not deceived, I tell you," persisted the young man. "I know it must be Eola. You are unkind to force me away from her in this—"

The remainder of his speech was lost as they entered the room which was intended for Austin's use.

Turning to Marian, the woman in black said:

"Yes, you are right. I am your friend. You have not a truer one in this world than I. But I am surprised—how came you here?"

"I was driven from my home—if I dare call it home—last night. Gil Bret came in—you know him?"

"Too well!"

"He was greatly troubled when he learned that you had been there, and when we told him you had carried away the leather bag, then he was angry. Though he is a rough man, he has never spoken cross words to me, in all the long years I have been with him, until last night. When he found the bag was gone he said we must separate; and then—then he drove me from the house."

"My poor little one! out in the cold, damp air!" and she drew the frail form to her, caressingly.

"I was so glad to get away from him forever that I didn't mind it much. A kind policeman brought me here."

"Where were you going just now?"

"Gil Bret said I must leave the city. But I couldn't make up my mind to do it. Something held me back and told me I had better wait. Do you know, I thought, perhaps, I might see you? I was going out to see if I couldn't find some work."

"No; you must not do that. It is most fortunate I met you. Remain here with me. Let me be a mother to you."

The closing sentence was uttered with emotion, and the arms that were entwined round Marian Mead trembled nervously.

Apparent was it that the speech of the woman in black was one welling the sincerest sympathies of her heart, and it touched a responsive chord in Marian's bosom, for she exclaimed, while the bright blue eyes were liquid with unconscious tears:

"Oh, will you do that? Will you be my mother—to care for me, love me, and be with me always?"

"Could you be happy, Marian, if I was your mother?"

"Yes!" she breathed, and the soft, sweet accent of the monosyllable volumed more than ever passages of poesy.

"Then forget your little troubles. Call me 'mother' if you choose, for it will be music to my ears."

"And I love you so already!" said Marian, as she received the warm kiss of one who, her heart told her, was near and dear to her. "I feel quite happy now!"

Mrs. Lenner put in an appearance at this point.

"You see," she rattled off, "the men's a-comin' to dinner, an' it won't be nice for you to be stared at, like you know they are boun' to do when there's a woman afore them, an' that woman good-lookin' an— Why, bless me! there's my poor little darlin' angel of a critter, too. How frightened she looks, to be sure, an' her pretty face a-blushin' as if she'd been over the stove a cookin' dinner! My dear, keep away from the men's eyes, or that face of yours, with its heaven-like beauty, will make trouble. Come, now; you'd better both be out of the way—"

"Come, Marian, let us go up to my room."

"Why, laws me! do you know the little critter?" exclaimed Mrs. Lenner, as the three ascended the stairs. "Well, there! what a funny, funny world. I'm right glad you've got a friend by you, my fawn, for there's no knowin' what may happen to people that's unprotected nowadays, as Jacob keeps tellin'—"

"Is this our room, Mrs. Lenner?"

"Yea. Why, sakes! are you goin' to sleep together, too? How long have you known Mrs. Wernich, hey, pet?"

"Oh, not long," replied Marian; "but—" She felt her hand squeezed, and, in obedience to the silent admonition, said no more.

The room to which they were conducted was tidily arranged, and wore an air of plain but substantial comfort.

When Marian and her friend were alone, the latter said:

"Now, my precious one, for a little chat. I have much to say."

"Oh! yes; do talk to me. I am so happy in listening to your words that it seems like a dream. I am sure you mean to be a kind,

guardian angel, to watch over and shield me from harm and sorrow."

"I am not an angel, Marian; but you are very, very dear to me."

Placing two chairs the woman in black seated Marian beside her, and took both her dimpled bands in her own.

"You call me 'mother'—"

"Did you not tell me to? And oh! there is a whispering voice here—" laying a hand upon her full, light-heaving bosom—"that says I should do it. And I will call you mother, for there's a strange, loved music in the word, which carries my thoughts back, back so far that I forget what I am striving to recollect."

Her gaze drooped, and while her eyes seemed to study some faint picture in the buried past, her companion looked earnestly upon the lovely profile, her own heart palpitating with a concealed emotion.

"Marian, you have called me 'mother,'" even while you had no good reason—"

"Oh! yes. I love you!"

"Still, that would not be sufficient reason for addressing me by the name which belongs to no other than the one who, perchance, now lies cold in the last cradle of this earth—lulled to sleep by angels."

"Can my mother be dead?" murmured the beautiful girl; "oh! can it be that I shall never see her face? I scarce—I do not remember her. But you have said you will be a mother to me. You will love me. I can be happy." She wound her arms around the other's neck, and pillow'd her golden tresses on the bosom of her to whom she now looked as her only friend on the wide earth.

"Marian, look up. No; your mother is not dead! She lives—is near you!"

"Not dead! Near me! Say it once more; oh! do! Where is she? You will take me to her! Say you will!"

The tearful eyes were lighted with hope; her voice was pleading in its eagerness.

"Look—Marian—I am your mother!"

For a few seconds the words seemed to dwell echoingly in the silence of the room; and then, with a burst of joy that found its vent in convulsive sobs, Marian was clasped in the other's arms.

"You are! You are!" she cried. "Yes, you are my mother! I knew it! I felt it! Mother—mother—dear mother!"

Their tears were mingled as the spray of heaven's founts, and two souls thrilled with the ecstasy of brimming happiness.

"Yes, Marian, my own child, my own flesh and blood. God witnesses to my words: I am your mother! I would have told you when I saw you last night—for the first time in long, sad years—but thought it would be better to wait until a more favorable moment—a moment such as this. We have come together strangely. You would ask why we have been so long separated, and—"

"Yes, yes; do tell me."

"Then listen. It is a not long story, but you shall hear it that you may know how unhappy I have been since the dark hour in which you were snatched away—"

At that instant there came a knock at the door, and Doctor Cauley was admitted.

"Well," he said in a voice that would have sounded brusque to one who did not know his nature; "here I am. Mighty long ways out here, isn't it? How's the young man? Got a fever yet? Didn't shake him up much in moving, did you? Pardon—how are you this morning? Who's this, now?"

"A friend of mine—Marian Mead. Doctor Cauley, Marian," shaking hands with the physician.

Doctor Cauley was extremely gracious. For an old, confirmed bachelor, he surprised himself. He bowed, 'ahem'd,' drauk in her beauty with his sharp eyes, and while proclaiming himself her most 'obedient,' thought:

"By Jove! of all the lovely creatures Charles street ever contained on Sunday afternoon, this one produces a total eclipse! But there, Cauley, you vagabond, 'twon't do; no, sir; you've got over that. Ahem! I'd like to see my patient now, if you please, madam."

"Some other time I will tell you all, Marian; excuse me now," whispered Marian's newfound mother, and the woman in black bid the way to Austin Burns's bedside.

Wat Blake was there, and in reply to the physician's inquiries, informed him that the young man had sunk into a raging fever, almost immediately upon being placed in bed.

"Un pretty strong, high, unwholesome fever it is, too," said Cauley, musingly. "Give me pen, ink and paper. No time to lose. This must be checked. He'll be in a serious condition if we don't. Why don't you jump? Retain your self-possession and assist me."

The required articles being furnished, a servant was dispatched to the nearest drug-store with a prescription.

Doctor Cauley withdrew shortly after having given special instructions regarding the care of Austin, and promising to call again at nightfall.

About four o'clock Wat Blake went out, and the woman in black seated herself, with a book, near Austin, occasionally bathing the hot brow of her unconscious charge.

Marian Mead was happy. For a long time after being left alone she continued to weep; but her tears were the overflow of joy that seemed immeasurable in its fullness.

The dinner-hour came and passed. Late in the afternoon she tapped gently upon the door of the room wherein lay Austin Burns, and asked if she could not assist in any way. But she was put off with a kiss by her mother, who promised to return to her very shortly, and narrate what the doctor's sudden arrival had interrupted.

But the hours flew on.

Doctor Cauley attended his patient in the evening, and departed. Wat Blake was unaccountably detained, and the watcher could not leave her post.

It was nearly ten o'clock when Marian sought her couch, and in the customary prayer her lips had breathed to God each night since early childhood, there went up more than was her wont, to thank Him for His manifold kindnesses and the restoration to her of a mother.

And then sweet sleep; and dreams in rapturing accord with her buoyant spirits wafted through the portals of repose.

CHAPTER XII.

"WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"

FOR one moment only Forde sat upright, statue-like, ghastly in his pallor, and then, with a low, painful groan, sunk backward.

Haxon sprung forward to sustain him, but was waved back; and Forde cried:

"Man, man! pity me! What do you ask?—what merciless fiend sent you upon this mission?" and burying his face in his hands, he wailed, "Oh, Heaven, be more lenient! Why should I suffer thus?"

"Mr. Forde, really I do not understand—"

"Not understand?"—fixing a piercing gaze upon the other, as if he would read his utmost soul. "Not understand what you have asked me? Then, why do you ask? Take back your words—take them back, I say! Say that you do not mean what you speak, else you will drive me to madness! My train whirls—it whirls—I am beset!"

Harnden Forde passed up and down in a way that seemed unaccountable for one in his weakened condition; and Haxon, watching him in partial amazement and wonder, was striving vainly to solve how his simple words could create such an outburst.

"Mr. Forde, permit me—"

"Harold Haxon, begone! Leave me alone. If you do not go, after this I may brave you with defiance, and commit—"

"Moderate your tone. I am not used to being ordered. My request—what will you do about it?"

"Do!" fairly screamed Forde, in his excited frenzy. "I cannot, will not, grant it! You are set upon me by some demon! Your words are one of a well-learned lesson! Some one has put you up to this! I see it—I read it in your face! Who told you to ask of me what you have?"

"It matters nothing."

"But you shall not have it! Hear me: though I be blasted in life—death—eternity, you shall not have the crescent! Though you feed me, piecemeal, in my wreck, to the ever-hungry jaws of gossip!—drag me, with relentless hand and tongue, through the mires of shame!—do anything you will—your worst—yet you shall never touch the Black Crescent! My heart's blood shall flow to keep it from you! My weak limbs shall go down to the earth, mangled and broken, in the struggle to keep it from you! Every muscle in my frame shall palsy before I release it to your grasp! It

is mine—mine! Have you heard? Ha! ha! ha!"

"So!" thought Haxon; "just as Gil Bret foresaw! And he said it was superstition. Forde will not part with it. I would give an arm to know why he is so worked up."

Forde's excitement was of such intensity that Haxon feared it would terminate in delirium.

He saw that his presence augmented the other's state, and so concluded to withdraw.

"Mr. Forde, I am going. But I will come again to-morrow. Remember what I have said regarding Eola. Let there be no more of her girlish pets. I shall not insist further upon the matter of the crescent; but"—a new idea seemed to strike him—"please have a check for five hundred dollars made out to my order when I call again."

Haxon drew on his kid gloves, and with a parting bow, which Forde seemed scarcely to notice, left the house.

There was a light footfall on the carpet behind Forde, and a hand fell upon his shoulder.

"Father, Mr. Haxon has gone."

Eola stood beside him.

"Yes," he returned, absently; "he has gone—thank Heaven!"

"Amen! Now, I am here for an explanation."

"Do not ask it now, my child; wait—"

"But I shall!"

She spoke determinedly. There was something in her mind which rendered her expression even stern, as she faced her father with a searching, steady glance.

"Father," said Eola, in a calm, stern voice, "what has transpired this afternoon, besides being an insult to me, is wrapt in such mystery that I have a right to ask explanation. You forget what I have undergone. You do not realize the magnitude of my injury. The rights of woman, the bonds of delicacy, etiquette, honor—all have been outraged by that miserable man, in his unaccountable language! How dare he speak to you as he did?"

"Some other time, Eola. Wait a little while. I am too disturbed, unsettled, to answer your inquiries now."

"No, it must be at once—here! I was in the hall during your conversation awhile ago, and though I am not an eavesdropper, I felt warranted in listening, after what has passed. To say I am amazed does not express my state of mind. Harold Haxon yields some terrible influence over you—"

"Eola! Eola!—"

"Ay, you are in his power! How? In what way? Speak; I must, I will know!" Her lovely face was aglow, her blue eyes were unusually brilliant, and the lips compressed together firmly, when she concluded her forcible speech.

"Not now," he said, striving to soothe her.

"More," she continued, growing warmer in her resolution to untangle the web which confused her; "tell me what he meant by—the Black Crescent!"

Harnden Forde started.

"You see, I heard all. What was meant by his allusion to the crescent? Look!—I have it upon my arm! You know it is there!"

Unbuttoning her jacket sleeve, she bared her arm to the shoulder; and there, just above the elbow-joint, was a fac-simile, as close as India-ink could make it, of the crescent which Harnden Forde had looked upon in his library on the night previous.

It was distinctly outlined; tiny spots indicated the diamonds in admirable imitation; and each small prong was surmounted by a minute crown to resemble the original device.

"Tell me," she cried; "what does this mean?"

CHAPTER XIII.

WHO IS HE?

UPON leaving Forde's house, Harold Haxon took a down-town car, and proceeded to "Guy's," where his last cent was paid over for a glass of ale, over which to ponder upon what he had passed through within the hour.

The behavior of Forde gave him great uneasiness.

"I'd give an arm to know what's up!" he mused. "Gil Bret is a deep one, and he must know why mention of the crescent should create such a rumpus. I shall demand a clearing up. Strange, how that man keeps me in continual darkness concerning his secrets. I

have been associated long enough with him to warrant his confidence. And he alone knows who I am—of my parents—yet will not tell me. Can it be that he kidnapped me when an infant? Hardly so; for I have always been allowed the utmost liberty of action; and he has never used harsh means to keep me near him. He seems interested in me—very. Tonight I will ask again. But then it will be useless; he won't speak out. He always puts me off. I wonder if there can be any bloodtie between us?"

Finishing his glass of ale, he walked out into the street, his meditations again, as in the morning, having for their center the unexplained disappearance of Austin Burns.

Bret had said nothing regarding the young man, and Harold Haxon was so absorbed in the bruiser's instructions that he had forgotten his rival.

Haxon was no sooner beyond the door, than a rather odd looking individual started from the back counter, advanced with long, cranky strides, and, reaching the pavement, gazed after him.

Six feet would not compass his height; a bean-pole, warped by exposure, conveys an admirable idea of his bodily appearance; his skeleton head was surmounted by an old, worn silk hat; around his throat, where an "Adam's apple" pointed prominently, was a dirty white satin kerchief; and underneath his arm he carried a white umbrella, rather worse than new.

He stood with nose elevated, and pale-gray eyes riveted, watching the retreating form of Haxon.

"That's him!" he squeaked; "two to one on it. Can't fool me with that nose, those eyes and them lips. No, sir-eel! Hum! Louise Ternor's counterpart, for all the world. He's certainly a rascal—runs in the family! Bad character, no doubt of it. Harold Haxon!—Harold Fiddlesticks! So. He's gone. Now then. All the way from Richmond by telegraph! Where's Wat Blake?—that's what I'm after. Um-m-m!" He was extremely nervous, fidgeting about while speaking, and when he concluded, he darted off in the direction of Holliday street.

Bells were tolling the hour of seven when Harold Haxon entered a car for Broadway, to fulfill his engagement with Gil Bret.

The afternoon had been whiled away, partly with strolling about, and half the time at Leache's billiard-room.

At the latter place he could be but a looker-on—bad to forego indulgence in his favorite amusement, owing to the fact that he was "broke."

He had turned the matter of his moneyless state over and over in his brain, but, with all the fertile substance of that organ, had failed to conceive how he and Bret could keep afloat without resorting to desperate means, since Forde was so obstinate about the crescent.

"If that stubborn, high-spirited fairy, Eola, can only be brought around at once," he thought, "Bret and I can manage, some way, to live for a few days. Once installed as Forde's son-in-law, then we are all right—plenty of money!"

As the car turned the corner at Broadway, and Haxon got out to continue up Baltimore street, a new idea fixed upon his mind.

"By the Eternal!" he exclaimed; "if Forde won't give me the crescent, and Eola won't marry me, even to save her father—if the worst comes, then he shall supply me with money. He shall pay me a good, round salary to keep his secret, and the check he is to give me to-morrow shall be the initiatory of my drawings on his purse. But I want the girl," he concluded, slowly; "for she is a jewel!"

Arriving at the corner of the Park fence, he walked slowly down toward the gates, not expecting to meet Bret, as he was somewhat earlier than the hour appointed.

He had taken but a few steps when he stopped short and looked ahead.

Two men were struggling in a fierce embrace, and a deep curse was borne to his ears as they fell to the pavement, rolling over and over.

At first he thought it merely a drunken brawl, but the voice that framed the savage oath was familiar, and, with an exclamation of surprise, he sprung forward.

The darkness was intense. He could not distinguish between them. At a risk, he

leveled a stunning blow at the one who happened to be uppermost.

The man sunk down with a groan, and his released antagonist leaped to his feet.

At this critical juncture a figure darted out from the doorway of the restaurant, on the opposite side of the street, and uttered a shrill cry of:

"Police! police!" It was the mysterious individual with the white umbrella.

He landed, like a shot, on Harold Haxon—flourishing his dilapidated rain-shield, and with it demolishing Haxon's best and only silk hat; for the blow he struck was like a lightning-bolt.

"Take that from me!" he shouted. "That's one I owe you—and it's paid! Come on—they're done for!"

Partially stunned by the unexpected stroke, Harold Haxon reeled backward and fell, almost before he could recover from his first astonishment; for he of the umbrella was quick as an electric flash in his movements, his descent was like the apparition of an invincible specter, and he was now hurrying away before Haxon dropped.

Wat Blake, keeping his resolution to secure the paper which he knew Gil Bret carried about his person, had watched since nightfall at the Golden Gates. But he had not, in accordance with his first intention, taken an assistant with him—deeming his own strength sufficient to overcome the bruiser.

Bret was not long in making his appearance, and Blake immediately went up to him.

"This is Gil Bret?" he said, interrogatively, pausing directly before him.

"That 'ere's my name. Who're you?"

"Maybe you have heard of me. My name is Blake—"

"Ha!"

"Wat Blake they call me."

"It is, eh?" uttered the bruiser, in a measured tone, striving to scrutinize the other's features. "Guess you're out a little there. Wat Blake went to the mines when he was a youngster, he did; an' there ain't nothin' been heard on 'im since. They say 'at he died out there."

"He did not die. I am he, Gil Bret. I am the brother of Bertha Blake—she whom you and Harold Haxon and a few thieving cut-throats tried to drown, off Locust Point, because she had discovered a plot of yours to rob the captain's safe on the ferry-boat! I say I am her brother! I ought to kill you!" He spoke hotly, and his breath came quick and short.

Bret was no coward. He was ever ready to fight for a "bold," and once securing that, a bull-dog was no circumstance to his tenacious clutch. Ever possessed of a brute courage, and, as we have stated, a brain that was generally cool, he was not the man to wince at a few strong words. And even when faced with guilt, his free-and-easy style was not in the least disturbed.

"Well," he said, eying Blake from head to foot, to compute the strength he would have to contend against, "if you're for killin' anybody, 't seems to me 'at you'd better begin right here—now!" His hand moved to a small dagger concealed beneath his vest, and he gathered his energies for a home thrust with the deadly weapon.

In marking the ponderous build of Blake, he saw that, in physical powers, he was the latter's inferior. And, besides, his antagonist would be stimulated by a burning hatred.

If Haxon was only here! But he was not.

"No," said Blake; "I don't want your worthless life!"

Bret could not disguise the fact that he felt relieved.

"But," he added, "you have a paper that I do want!"

"What paper?"

"I know not what it contains; but I do know that, with it, you and your villainous companion, Harold Haxon, are making a slave of Harnden Forde—"

"You do, eh?"

"Yes. I am here to demand it of you. Give it to me."

For a second Bret contemplated him, and then said, bluntly:

"You be diddled!"

"Do you refuse?"

"D' you take me for a flat? 'Cause, look 'e 're, now—if you buy me for a jackass, you're goin' to spend your money foolishly, you are. Ha! no, you don't!"

Blake leaped upon him, and wrenched the gleaming dagger from his grasp.

They clinched; then turned, twisted, strained till they panted for breath.

Bret fought for his life; for he had no doubt that was what his enemy sought. His trained muscles bent and straightened like steel bands as he resisted Blake's fierce assault!

Down they went. Bret was beneath. Presently he was on top. His muddy eyes fired with demoniac fury as he gained this advantage; and he raised his ponderous fist.

Blake's hand was in the breast-pocket of his antagonist. In another second, he drew out a pocket-book. The murderous fist descended—glanced, and spent its force on the bricks.

A cry of pain, a curse was upon Bret's lips, when he received a blow from behind, which felled him senseless.

Wat Blake gained his feet in time to see figure No. 4 knock down figure No. 3; and then, with the long, lanky individual beside him, he dashed away, down Pratt street.

"Who are you?" he asked, as they neared a gas lamp.

The light just then fell upon his companion's face, and he exclaimed:

"Christopher Crewly!"

"That's me! All the way from Richmond by telegraph! How are you, Wat Blake?—and how's your sister?"

CHAPTER XIV.

OFF FOR THE CAPITAL.

FORDE's agitation increased as Eola held her bared arm aloft, and exposed the crescent, pricked in India ink, upon the pure skin.

He had succeeded thus far in evading his child whenever she sought explanation of the mystery which seemed suddenly to have shrouded their house; but, in the present instance, he marked her resolute demeanor with no steady glance, and appeared unable, for a few seconds, to articulate.

With her fair forehead wrinkled slightly in a frown, and an expression of feature that told him excuses were no longer available, she stood. Her air was one of command, a mien of grace that combined the majesty of unswervable resolution; and her father, the man about whom there existed such mysterious and unfathomable atmospheres, was loth to speak.

"Once more, I bid you tell me all!" she said, and her voice was now of a low, peculiar tone. "Your strange actions have driven from me the only man I ever loved, or will love! Your inexplicable helplessness has submitted me to grossest insult—me, your child! And I, in the name of the honor of the Forde's, demand a reason for this singular play. Tell me, sir."

This spirit in Eola was new to Forde. It was the first exhibition of the woman in the beauteous fairy, who had always seemed to him simply a loving, obedient, careless girl. But her dignity had suffered; her heart was torn.

"Eola, go—leave me now, that I may calm myself. If you heard our conversation, then you know how greatly I am unsettled. I cannot speak, at present, all that is weighing upon my mind."

"You will not?"

"Will not, if you choose. But I promise you—"

"You have promised before," she interrupted, with a scarce perceptible sarcasm; "and yet those promises are not kept."

He felt the rebuke; for the sincerity of his tone, when he spoke again, showed that the force of her words was not lost.

"This time, my child, you shall not charge me with neglect. This promise will be kept."

"You promise to tell me all?"

"Yes. You know not what burdens me—its overwhelming weight. Oh! my child, I am not as you see me for nothing! If you only knew! If you only knew!"

The aged head bowed; the worn eyes filled with tears. She was touched by his voice, by his bent and tottering frame.

Her spirit softened, and all the warm solicitude of a child for its parent asserted supremacy in her bosom.

"Father! Father! I have spoken too harshly. Forgive me. But, oh! you do not know what a trial has been mine, or you would not blame me. It is but just that I should ask what I have—you know it is. I will not forget myself again; but tell me—tell me, for Heaven's sake! or my poor heart will burst!" She threw her arms around his neck, and kissed the haggard cheek.

"I promise you, Eola, you shall know all," he said, folding her gently to him. "But wait—wait until to-morrow or next day. You shall hear why I am so trampled upon, why so weak and helpless. I already feel that I must unbend to some one. I can no longer stand without support in my dreadful misery. I know you will be a comforter—will you not, my child?"

"Oh! yes, yes; I'll do anything I can, dear father; only tell me—tell me what all this means!"

"You shall know."

"Your promise is sacred now?"

"Yes."

"Then I will forget it, for a while, in other things I have to say. That wretch, Haxon, is coming again to-morrow—"

"Yes, he will be here. O—h! how I hate him. I could—"

"Sh! Remember, you are but a man; and God is ever watchful of the weak and oppressed, to judge and punish their persecutors. You will tell me, too, what power this is that Haxon has over you!"

"I said you should know all," and he spoke earnestly.

"Then, to what I was going to say: he is coming to-morrow, and will expect to find me agreeable to his wishes, resigned to becoming his wife. But he will be disappointed. I intend leaving Baltimore."

He looked at her, inquiringly.

"And you must leave, too," she added.

"We'll both say adieu to Baltimore to-night!"

"No!" he whispered, fearfully; "we cannot do that! He would bound upon our track, hunt us down, and finally pounce upon me, like a falcon on its prey! He would destroy me! It would send me to my grave! And you—you, my child—God only knows what you might suffer at his hands!"

"And is there no law to chain such a villain?"

"Do not speak of the law!" he half interrupted. "The law is my enemy!"

"Your enemy!" and she gazed at him, in surprise.

"There, there; don't push me further."

She appeared to revolve something in her mind, for a moment; and then, lifting her eyes to his, she said:

"Father, we must go!"

"No—"

"But, listen. If I am here, I will be again subjected to Haxon's insolence—and I will not put up with it."

"For my sake, Eola, consider that if you—"

"I am not so sure that it can benefit you to have me marry this man."

"If you do not, then I am ruined! Friends will desert me; the world will spit upon me! I shall be pointed at, and hissed, wherever I go! Haxon is merciless; and he can bring this about."

Though her astonishment was great, she said promptly:

"Then we will retire from the world together, dear father! There are many little paradises, bid from the knowledge of those who call themselves 'friends,' but frown upon one whose fortune lasts not forever—and to one of these happy bower's we'll go. Can we not be contented in solitude, with each other's love? Disgrace—if that is what you mean—is nothing, compared to marriage with Harold Haxon! And I am sure, Austin Bur—"

"Don't mention him! Forget him. He can never be anything to you!"

She saw that allusion to her lover invariably threw her father into a state depicting fear in every outline of feature; and, though it was upon her lips to say that Austin was, and ever would be her prince among men, his love her greatest happiness, her heart his own—she refrained, substituting:

"But think of what I say. If there is disgrace to be met, let us meet it. Do not ask me to exchange marriage vows with Harold Haxon; for I never, never, never will!"

Harnden Forde did think, and seriously.

Her words had given rise to thoughts which trained through his mind like masses of fire. That fire of reviving self.

His veins were thrilling with a new warmth as he weighed the assuring utterances of those ripe lips; and looking into the blue eyes that beamed so tenderly upon him, he felt that his child was more than child, delicate of form and weak of muscle though she was—a sustaining prop, a comforter, counselor, one who could smooth the thorns of life's paths, and

work the mind's spell of barrenness and woe, until bright flowers should color the new-made soil with hues of joy.

All this he thought upon; and his form straightened, the weary eyes kindled to brightness, he smiled as he had not smiled for days.

"Be it so!" he said at last. "We will fly! Then, if the worst comes, Eola, you will stand by me!—you will not desert me in the clouds that are sure to come!"

"I'll never desert you!" she replied, fervently. "Your sorrows shall be mine!—your trials shall be my battles!—and if ever the mists of woe are dispelled, and happiness is restored, then I will share that too; for I am your child, and nothing—nothing can separate us!"

"Noble girl!" he cried, kissing again and again, the lips that molded those words. "God give me strength, now! I will arouse! I will defy Harold Haxon, and his power! It is fixed—we will fly!"

"I am so glad to hear you speak like that! You are yourself again. Now shall we ride out? You need fresh air."

"Yes, anything."

She bounded away with a light heart.

Forde ascended to his library, where he found faithful James still at his watch.

"James, order my carriage. I will remain here until you return."

"Yes, sir."

Forde's manner struck the serving-man, as considerably altered since morning.

When the open carriage was driven round, Eola was ready, and she and her father were soon being borne, at leisure speed, toward Druid Hill Park.

The beauty of the day, and Eola's constant, merry chat, wrought great changes in Forde. Involuntarily, he found himself joining in her lively humor, and the fair girl applied herself assiduously to her task.

At half-past seven o'clock that evening, they were again seated in the carriage and being driven to the Camden station, where they intended taking the 8:30 train for Washington!

And why to Washington? There the admirable girl had hit upon a plan to divert her father.

The carnival!—that would call his attention from his troubles. And so they numbered two, among the thousands, who were journeying toward the National Capital, to witness the great *fête-champêtre*.

There were only two small trunks accompanying them; the rest of the baggage had been shipped to Philadelphia, in the afternoon, by the reliable James.

James also, had a tiny perfumed note in his keeping, directed to Austin Burns.

In due time the cars were steaming away from Baltimore, and, with their departure, Forde vented a long-drawn sigh of relief.

Harold Haxon's prey was slipping away from him.

CHAPTER XV.

CHRISTOPHER CREWLY ON THE CARPET.

WAT BLAKE and the eccentric individual with the umbrella, were old acquaintances, as was plainly indicated in the hearty shake of hands which followed the latter's salutation.

"How long have you been in town, Crewly?" asked Blake, as they continued down Pratt street at a rapid pace.

"This morning. All the way from Richmond by telegraph. Got your sister's letter a week ago—guess the rascals feel sore!" with a jerk of the head and a contraction of countenance.

"And you were looking for me?"

"Some. Been all round town, looking at monuments and gutters. Saw that villain, Haxon, at 'Guy's' this afternoon."

"How did you happen so opportunely on the scene, just now?"

"Made up my mind to walk from one end to the other, of every street in the city. And if I didn't find you then—um! I'd have advertised. Just finished up Baltimore street, and was hunting for a night's lodging. Your sister said, come with a jump—so jump I did, brought no baggage but a carpet-bag, and some scamp stole that at the depot; had this shirt on four days, etc., etc."

"Were there no directions in my sister's letter?"

"Yes, a large one—*Baltimore!* Um! fear I've broken my umbrella over the dog." And he examined the article in question with an air

of anxiety. He appeared to set great value on it, and presently expressed satisfaction at finding it uninjured.

"I know sister will be glad to see you, Mr. Crewly."

"Chris Crewly, without the prefix. Ahem, yes, no doubt of it. Are you going to put in your lick right away?"

"Yes, we shall strike now."

"Been to see Forde yet?"

"Yes, and asked him for both the certificate and the crescent."

"So. Well?"

"He was willing to give me the certificate—"

"And you took it?"

"No—"

"Jackass!" interrupted Crewly in a tone of disgust.

"I wanted the crescent, too; and would not take one without the other—"

"Ninny! why didn't you grab at the chance? Um! Ain't like me—take what you get, keep what you've got and get more. See? Cardinal points of life, nowadays, my dear sir. Bad management—very bad. Tell him I was alive!"

"Sister wrote him a note in which she told him that."

"He wilted?"

"He is in a terrible state of mental excitement. But you shall hear all pretty soon."

"That's what I want. Full particulars. I'm getting rusty."

"Would you believe it, he attempted my life, only last—"

"Vagabond! yes. Of course I believe. Gave me a quart of laudanum once, more or less. Overdose, rather. Chris Crewly wasn't born to die of laudanum. Glad I didn't break my umbrella!"

They reached Broadway and entered a car. During their ride they had much to talk about; but their conversation is not essential at this point. Blake was greatly pleased with the meeting, which is not surprising, when we consider that Christopher Crewly was— But wait.

The odd personage squirmed from his seat, with a nod, when Blake intimated that they must leave the car, for one of the Blue Line; and when seated again, he seemed to coil himself round himself, folding, turning, wrapping his legs, one with the other; and setting his elbows against his hips, and raising the handle of the umbrella to his puckered lips, he riveted his expressionless eyes upon the roof of the car, in an abstracted gaze.

Arriving at the boarding-house of Mrs. Lenner, they ascended to Austin Burns's room.

The woman in black was keeping unrelaxed vigil; and upon their entrance she started up, exclaiming immediately:

"Christopher Crewly!—you here?"

"Ahem! Yours forever—Hang it!" in bowing he dropped his hat, and stooping to pick it up, his umbrella tangled itself between his legs, tripping him most beautifully.

With a gutta-percha-like contraction of arms and limbs, he gathered himself up.

"Hang it! no, that is—didn't I say I was glad to see you? Excuse me. My umbrella, you see. Couldn't help falling."

It seemed impossible for him to smile; but he made up in cordiality, by dropping both hat and umbrella, as he warmly shook the white hands that were extended to him.

The articles were picked up at once, however, and deposited on a side table—the umbrella across the crown of the hat—after which their owner seated himself, with a bump that jarred the room, and gravely surveyed the apartment.

"I wrote you a letter, Mr. Crewly—"

"Chris Crewly. Yours forever—much. Yes, I got it."

"And that brought you—"

"On a goose-chase," he interrupted again. "Ahem! See, you didn't say, exactly, where I'd find you; and there was nothing to guide me but the heading of the letter. But you said 'come quick'—and I come quick!" "Wouldn't do to make a fuss about directions, you know. Ahem! Been well?"

"Quite well—what is it, brother?"

Wat Blake was near the lamp, busily engaged with overhauling the contents of the pocket-book he had secured.

Her inquiry was called forth by an exclamation, as he held up to the light a paper so creased as to be torn, and crumpled and soiled with bad usage.

"I have it!" he cried. "See; this must be it."

She arose quickly to examine the paper; and Crewly, with an eye to information, also left his seat to look at it.

It was a check on the — National Bank, for five thousand dollars, in Louise Ternor's name, and bore date of December 20th, 1863.

"Um! A forgery, I see," mused Crewly, aloud. "That sig. isn't natural. Where'd you get it?"

"Can it be, Wat," said the woman in black, "that he has forged this check?"

"It would seem so. You remember the paper alluded to in Louise Ternor's letter? And this, then, is the secret of Haxon's power over Forde. No wonder he was willing to persuade his daughter to marry the villain; for he clings to his reputation as an honorable man, next his life. How fortunate, sister, that you got wind of Haxon's intended movements!"

"Yes, it was!" declared Crewly, though he really had no idea what they were driving at.

"If this is the secret, then Austin shall soon be restored to favor. The power of the villains is broken. What more is there in the pocket-book?"

"Something over forty dollars."

"Ah! then we have taken their last cent from them!"

"I say," edged in Crewly, stroking his chin and looking attentively at the paper and the woman in black; "excuse me—but, now, ahem! what's it all about, eh?"

Besides being a friend, Crewly was, also, in their confidence; for, in half an hour, he was fully acquainted with the plans of Bret and Haxon, their exactions from Forde, their attempt upon the life of Austin Burns, and many other particulars.

"Um! Well, now! they are villains. So, Louise Ternor's dead, eh? Glad of it. And this Austin Burns—unfortunate vagabond—where's he?"

"There," pointing to the bed.

"Eh? How?" He wheeled round, and as his gaze rested on Austin's pale face, he added, in a louder key: "You don't say so!"

"Sh!" admonished Blake; "he sleeps now. Do not disturb him."

"They poked him with a knife, eh?" continued Crewly, advancing to the bedside and contemplating Austin with a gaze of peculiar gravity. Poor fellow! Wonder how it feels—a knife sticking into one's ribs! no—you said in the shoulder. Um! Well! well! well!"

Blake exchanged a few words with his sister, while Crewly was thus engaged, and she presently turned to him, saying:

"I've found my child, Mr. Crewly."

Again his lank limbs served him as a pivot, for he faced her with astonishing suddenness, and exclaimed:

"Found her!"

"Yes."

"Certain it's Ora?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"In the next room."

"Don't say! Ahem! Now ther, how'd you find her?"

"It's a long story, and the hour is late," said Blake, who had been advised during the afternoon of Maria's presence in the house. "Sister will tell you, some other time. She must be tired now, having had no sleep for over thirty hours."

"Yes, Wat, I am tired. Had you not better call Mrs. Lenner?"

The old lady was summoned. Her first words were inquiries after the condition of Austin Burns.

"Well now, there!" she exclaimed, when informed that another room was wanted; "what on yearth 'll I do? Rooms is scarce—"

"Not a particle of difference, madam," inserted Crewly, with a spasmodic breath: "just show me a stray wash-boiler and I'll curl up in that—ahem!"

"Oh! I know," added she; "if that darlin' little angel of a critter's a-goin' to sleep with you, Mrs. Wernich; why, then, Mr.—Mr.—what's your name?"

"Chris Crewly," he prompted with dignity: "Chris Crewly, LL.D. All the way from Richmond by telegraph. Lost my carpet-bag. Left my pocket-book on the piano. Yours for ever."

"Law's sakes! Did I ever! Why, you do

talk just like a foamin' tea-kettle. But come on, an' I'll show you the way."

Christopher Crewly, LL.D, not over-pleased with her comparison, straightened himself up and elevated his nose as he followed after her.

The door was hardly closed, when he pushed it open again, and strode back for his hat and umbrella.

"Excuse me," he said. "Can't leave these behind, you know. Ahem! Good-night."

"Good night," and he was gone.

Wat Blake relieved his sister of her watch, and she retired.

Marian was slumbering sweetly when she entered the room—wandering through the elysian fields of dreamland.

CHAPTER XVI.

DEAD BROKE.

We left two villains *hors-du-combat*.

Gil Bret was first to recover himself, and he gained his feet with a scramble, a slip and a jump. Had it been daylight, we would have seen, that his face was red, his temple blue and swollen, and his actions those of one who could not fully understand his situation.

In the same moment, he was calm; he comprehended all.

He saw a still form dimly outlined on the pavement.

Haxon returned to consciousness at that instant; but he rose slowly.

The two were not long in recognizing each other. It is said, you can put two thieves to robbing a house in the dark, and, though neither may be aware of the other's presence, their movements will co-operate to an end of mutual benefit. So, in the dark of the street, they knew one another.

"Well, Haxy," muttered the bruiser, in a slow tone; "you're a fine dose, you are!"

"What's the matter, Bret?"

"Matter!" he repeated, as if he had not heard aright. "Matter! do you say? Well—look 'e here—didn't you wax me 'n the ear just now? Say?"

"I struck some one—"

"Yes; an' it was me!" growled Bret.

"I couldn't see who I hit," said Haxon, apologetically, while he rubbed his head with his hand.

The side of his head felt sore.

Christopher Crewly had "hit out" twice—once for a hat-demolisher, and again for a knock-down. Both blows were well put.

Bret's head was not altogether sound, either. The punishment he had received at the hands of his friend had left its mark.

Crewly's shout for the police had been heard, and several parties were already crowding the doorway of the restaurant.

The brilliant light from the interior of the room was shed full upon Haxon, and perceiving him, the two or three men started to cross the street.

This movement was observed by Bret, who said, in a hurried whisper:

"Come on, Haxy; they're after us."

"My hat?" said Haxon, inquiringly.

It lay near them, and when the ill-used article was recovered, they started off.

"Who was it shouted for the police?" asked Bret, as they skulked rapidly along, keeping close to the railing.

"I cannot say."

When the individuals from the restaurant reached the spot, no one was to be seen.

Haxon and Bret also turned down Pratt street.

Reaching Broadway, they entered a car, and it was the next one to that in which were the lawyer and Wat Blake.

"You say you don't know who yelled for the police?" put Bret, when they were seated.

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Well, that is queer!"

"I saw some one," continued Haxon, "suddenly appear on the scene, and before I could defend myself, something struck me—I think—an umbrella."

"Very queer!" commented Bret. "It's mighty sing'lar 'at such a mess should happen. I'll forgive the lick 'at you gave me, 'cause I don't s'pose you could see how 't was."

"What are you thinking about, Bret?"

The bruiser seemed unusually thoughtful; his eyes fixing upon the floor of the car during his speech, and his mind, evidently, not wholly with his words.

He looked up, and gazed earnestly into his companion's face.

"Well, I'll tell you, Haxy,"—lowering his

voice, and glancing suspiciously at a negress who occupied the corner seat opposite them—"an' it's this. I know now, 'at you were right about Bertha Blake bein' alive—"

"Of course. You might as well have believed me in the first place."

"Wait. More'n that; her brother's alive, too."

"Ah!"

"You never saw 'im, but you've heard enough from me to know that he's a enemy of yours. When I used to tell you about 'im, he was a boy. Now, that 'ere boy's got to be a man. That 'ere man met me, to-night, at the Gates—hold on now, till I've done! He ord'r'd me to give up the paper 'at we've got ag'in' Forde. He's mighty worked up 'bout our tryin' to drown his sister, off Locust Point—"

"But the paper?" interrupted Haxon, uneasily.

"That's what we were a-fightin' about!"

"He has not got it!"

"Of course not—"

"Fare, gentlemen." The conductor stood before them.

Gil Bret felt for his pocket-book.

Harold Haxon saw the rough visage of his companion turn pale as death.

"What's the matter, Bret?"

"Nothin'—nothin'"—feeling in another pocket. But search was useless; he had been robbed.

Fortunately, he had a dollar bill put away loose. This he gave to the conductor, and his hand trembled as he handed it over.

While waiting for his change, Haxon marked an expression truly fearful in his bulldog countenance.

When the conductor had departed, Bret turned to Haxon and whispered, hoarsely:

"Robbed—by thunder!"

"But the paper is safe!" quickly.

"It was in my pocket-book. They're gone!"

"Ha! Gil Pret—"

"Tain't the worst! All my money's gone too! We're dead broke!"

For one second, Haxon looked at him in dismay. Then a groan fell from his lips.

"Shut up!" hissed the bruiser, grasping his arm. "Don't say anythin' more."

They left the car at Baltimore street bridge.

"Gil Bret," said Haxon, as they stood looking over the rail, down into that historical murk of filth and mud, "do you mean, seriously, that you have lost that valuable paper?"

"Been robbed!" was the brief rejoinder, spoken absently.

Under the circumstances, Haxon wondered that his companion could maintain such composure.

"Robbed!" he repeated. "By whom?"

"Didn't I tell you? Wat Blake—curse 'im!"

"Then, what are we to do? Why, man, you don't seem to realize our loss."

"Yes I do, too!" declared Bret, in a brief, blunt, snappish tone.

"Then rouse up. Don't stand there dream-ing—"

"What's the use? We're sunk!"

"Can't we get the paper back?"

"Get—thunder!"

"And no money left, either!"

"On'y this 'ere dollar 'at I bu'st on the car—bark!"

An alarm of fire was sounding. Bells tolled in discordant echoes, and here and there a faint cry arose upon the air.

Presently, steamer No. 5 came thundering along—its smoke-stack spitting flame, its driver yelling, and a wake of glowing embers marking its headlong course.

"Hallo! Where's the fire?" shouted Bret, to a fireman, who seemed rather to whiz than run past them.

An answer was growled back, and the words seemed to please Bret.

"See, Haxy, it's just round the corner! Come on—let's go."

The fire was quite near. A bright glare suddenly lit up the heavens, but died out almost in the same moment.

As they turned a corner and joined the crowd that ran, jostled, swore, panted and howled, Haxon felt his arm grasped.

"Hold on," said the bruiser, in a low tone. "Come in here."

In the lapse of a second, they stood in a narrow alley that was dark, silent, grave-like.

"What's up, Bret?"

"You ain't asked me anythin' 'bout that 'ere Burns chap—"

"No! what—"

"He's in here."

"Where?"

"Come on, an' I'll show you. Softly, now."

Haxon heard the other moving away, and he followed—groping along the damp brick wall.

They reached a gate. It was unfastened. A few seconds more, and they were at the kitchen window. With a little difficulty, this was forced open, and the interior of the house was gained.

"Sb! Careful, now," admonished Bret, whisperingly. "Burns is in this house. I tracked him after you left me on the bridge. Bertha Blake's here, too, I reckon, an' her brother. We're right in the nest of 'em. Easy—take care—we can't afford to kick up a rumpus yet. I'm after a bag 'at's got five thousan' dollars in it!"

And this was why Bret had been so quiet. He was planning to better their situation. His brain had summed up: Wherever the woman in black was, would, also, be the bag of money; where she was, would, also, be Wat Blake; Blake must have the paper; and these parties must be where he knew Austin Burns to be; for he had no doubt, after what Haxon told him at Wilson's restaurant—having since been convinced of his companion's veracity—that Bertha Blake had the young man in her care.

The hour was growing late. If they had retired, he might make a bold dash, and secure both the money and the paper.

It was worth trial; and Bret was no novice in the art of burglary.

The crowd running to the fire served him. Neither he nor Haxon were observed when they slipped into the alley.

"Are you *sure* Burns is here?" inquired Haxon, in a guarded voice.

"Yes. But don't you think 'bout him till I tell you. Money first."

With the stealth of cats, they made their way to the parlor—paused—listened. Not a sound.

"They're in bed. Got a match?"

Haxon produced a match, and by its tiny flame they saw that the room was empty.

Stepping cautiously, they ascended to the second story. All was still there.

The several doors on the landing were open. Bret's suspicions were aroused.

"Light another match, Haxy."

When the match was ignited, they cast a hurried glance into each room. All were deserted—empty—silent.

"Fooled, by thunder! They're gone!"

"Gone!" echoed Haxon.

That Bret was disappointed, we may safely infer, for he supplemented his first exclamation with an oath so deep, harsh, terrible, as to make even Harold Haxon shiver.

But he betrayed no further chagrin, and silently retraced his steps.

"Where do you suppose they've gone to?"

"Makes no difference," returned Bret, sur-lily; "it's enough for me 'at they're gon'."

"Then we are no better off than we were an—"

"You wait."

Bret wanted money. Their situation was startling. Bayview, with its cupola, and broad grounds; its solitude in the midst of winter barrenness; this loomed up in the vision of his imagination, and he was, really, not so easy in his mind as he had forced himself to appear a short time previous.

Money must be procured in some way. With true burglar instinct, he sought the pantry.

Here he met with another disappointment. Not a fork, spoon, or even a napkin-ring rewarded his close search. Muttering another curse of direful frame, he turned his attention to the parlor.

There was nothing of value, except the heavy, unavailable furniture.

"Well, this 'ere is a fine go!" he growled, in a half-savage mood. "Nary a cent, nor silver. All our trouble for nothin'— Ha! what's that?"

There was a faint noise in the direction of the kitchen—a step, a rustle, a faint something—and, with the fear of guilt, they held their breath and listened for a repetition of the sound.

CHAPTER XVII.

BERTHA BLAKE'S GREAT WRONG.

THE first act of our eccentric friend, Christopher Crewly, after bidding Mrs. Lenner good-night, was to seat himself on the edge of the little iron bed, and look steadfastly at the floor, as if he saw, in the worn rag carpet, something both novel and interesting.

From a state of momentary abstraction, he aroused, and tenderly drew forth, from the lining of his hat—a pair of stockings.

This piece of magic was followed by extracting, from the inside of his precious umbrella—well, let it suffice that he presented a nice white front at breakfast next morning.

The bed was too short at one end for Crewly. In cosily shrouding his shoulders, he drew up his feet, with a squeal, for they had touched the ice-like frame.

The ceiling slanted, directly over him, and in sitting up to adjust the covers, he struck his head an excruciating bump.

Finally, he curled himself up, and, in the diminutive heap, the dignified, six-foot Christopher Crewly, LL.D., was lost.

Shortly after breakfast, next day, the room in which Marian Mead had passed so blissful a night, contained a party of four.

Marian, with the woman in black, was seated near the window, while Crewly, his face molded to extraordinary gravity, occupied a chair near them, and was conversing with Wat Blake.

Blake and Crewly had been introduced to Marian, and the happy girl, conscious of the love and protection that now hovered round her, knew not whether to laugh or weep—so uncertain, oftentimes, is the ecstasy of unexpected joy.

Good Mrs. Lenner would, undoubtedly, have made one of the party, but that she was by the side of Austin Burns.

"You promised me, dear mother," said Marian, "to return last night, in time to tell me of myself. You don't know how anxious I have been."

"And so I would, darling—but I was by the bedside of one who is near and dear—"

"Another child?" interrupted Marian, softly.

"No—not my child; but the child of one now dead, and who ever knew the fondest love I could bestow—my sister's child."

"Ahem!"

"Well, Mr. Crewly?"

"You're going to tell her?"

"Yes—"

"All right. Excuse me. I'll listen, too. Attention, Wat Blake."

"I have not always been accustomed to such plain comforts as those which now surround me, Marian," began the woman in black; "I have known every luxury wealth could create—every happiness soul could wish for on this earth. The causes of the change in my life, from joy to misery—for such has been its change—were two things: the first, a lovely woman; the second, a rare treasure called—The Black Crescent—"

"Ah! a crescent!" exclaimed Marian.

"Yes. You have it on your arm."

"I have! I have! See!"

She bared her arm, and there, in precisely the same manner as upon the arm of Eola Forde, was a miniature representation of the crescent.

"I will explain that presently. Wait. I was the youngest daughter of Matthew Blake, of Richmond—a man of riches, standing, and wide influence. I was considered beautiful; reigned as an acknowledged belle in the first circles of society. Not a care was on my mind; I lived only for the morrow; money, friends—both were at my command. I had a rival. Those who were so fortunate as I, must have. That she was lovely, I cannot deny. I often envied the luster of eyes, that were even brighter than mine; but, with her beauty of face and form, there was combined a nature of opposite mold.

"When in the zenith of my career, a leader of fashion, the cynosure of admiring eyes, there came to our city a man whose graces won, first my esteem, and afterward, my love. But I was not alone in this love. My rival, whose name was Louise Ternor, also felt a passion for him; and when she discovered my feelings, hers were inflamed to desperation. It then became her task to win him from me. But she failed. Harden Forde and I were married, secretly; after which we left Richmond.

"I thought myself the happiest of women. But I did not, as I imagined, know the man to whom I had given my hand, my heart, my fortune. He was sickle—he was superstitious. For a time we lived blissfully together. A little girl was given us. We called it Eola.

"But I am too fast. Forde and I were not married at once. When Louise Ternor found her schemes unavailing, she wedded with a man who proved, subsequently, to be an adventurer. Luckily for her, her money and property were so tied up that he could not squander it. When Eola was born, Louise Ternor had a child, a boy, two years old. Her husband shot himself, at a gaming-table, on a Mississippi steamer, shortly after the birth of their child.

"There ensued nearly two more years of unmarred happiness. I had not seen, nor heard of, Louise Ternor for a long period, and I began to hope that she had left the country. Alas, for my hopes. With vengeful spirit and undying hate swelling in her bosom, she was watching me—waiting for an opportunity to make my life miserable.

"A few years had not erased the glorious beauty of her face, nor taken from the captivating symmetry of her form. Her lips were still a fountain of tempting sweets, and her voice was even richer in its music. Without my knowledge, she was weaving a devilish web around my husband, charming him from his allegiance, until I could not help perceiving that he had altered toward me. I saw that his love was not the same, and asked a reason for it. He was silent. I had to be resigned; but the very air I breathed whispered some pending crisis. My nights were sleepless. He talked in his slumber, but his utterances were unintelligible.

"The first blow came. He had speculated in slaves, and lost nearly the whole of his own wealth. Mine followed. It was the fiendish planning of Louise Ternor. She hated both of us. But I knew not, then, that she was anywhere near us.

"My father died about this time, and my brother Walter—always of a roving disposition—disappeared. I afterward ascertained that he had gone to the mines. He, and this lawyer—Mr. Crewly—were the only witnesses to my marriage besides the minister. The marriage was against my father's will; but, on his deathbed, he forgave me. And it was then that he handed me The Black Crescent, gleaming with its priceless jewels, and awing in the simple story connected with it. It had been handed down, through generations, to me; originally entered our line through an old Irish landlord, who said it was a gift from the 'Fairy Circle,' to a distant relative of his great, great grandfather—and the recipient, a beautiful girl. The magic property was supposed to be a talisman of good luck to whoever held it. The requirements of the possessor were, that his or her children should not fail to have pricked upon their arms a perfect *fac-simile* of it. When I tell you of Austin Burns, the young man by whose bedside I watched last, I will also tell you why it was given to me—for I was the youngest child, and the crescent must, invariably, go to the oldest, and in case of no children, then to the oldest brother or sister, and so on. As you are my child, you have the crescent on your arm.

"The next blow. I discovered that Louise Ternor was near us, and had for her ally a woman named Bret, who had a son named Gilson Bret. The three were working our ruin. Then, I learned the superstitious nature of my husband. This woman was carrying out the part of a fortune-teller, to serve the aims of Louise Ternor, and my husband, with a blind belief in the 'sayings of the stars,' was obeying any instruction they saw fit to give. He was the more blind, because my former rival, and now deadly enemy, held him in her power through the spell of her wondrous beauty.

"When I made this discovery, I lost no time in striving to undo what had been done. I was not quick enough. Louise Ternor knew of the Black Crescent; knew how great a value I placed upon it; knew that I guarded it jealously, in remembrance of my father. She persuaded him to steal it from me, which, in his mad infatuation, he did. My demand for its return was vain. For months there existed a coldness between us.

"Another blow came, that well-nigh cast me in my grave. He returned home quite late one evening, and I shall never forget the ex-

pression of his face as he stood before me. He had been absent in Richmond the week previous, though what occasioned that visit I could not divine. I learned soon enough. *He ordered me from him!* I was thunderstruck! I could not believe my ears! A storm of words ensued. Explanation he would not give. But my pride was stricken. I could not tolerate this, even from the man to whom I still clung with a fond, forgiving love. I left him. My wounded heart was further crushed when I returned to Richmond and found *the record of my marriage missing!*—the minister who had married us, dead!—and Christopher Crewly, who had witnessed the ceremony—none knew what had become of him!

"A terrible suspicion flashed upon my mind. This suspicion proved a true surmise. He meant to deny our marriage! To what end? Oh! Marian, I shudder. But, never mind—listen further"—her eyes dimming with tears at this point of the narrative. "Almost as soon as I arrived in Richmond you were born to me. You were, then, all I had left. Deserted, friendless, very near a beggar!—the world seemed dark and chilly, and not one ray upon the horizon, to promise a coming day. I could not stay long in Richmond. Just enough of my secret marriage had leaked out to render it a subject for scandal, and the merciless rumors that met me everywhere were unbearable.

"I came to Baltimore. Here another blow awaited me. You were stolen from me; you, my precious Ora—all I had left!"

"Ora—Ora," interrupted Marian, seeming to dwell thoughtfully upon the name.

"Yes—I had you christened 'Ora.' You were stolen, and then I did realize the full sense of my utter loneliness. I was beset on every side; arrows of hate were showering upon me wherever I turned; Louise Ternor let not an opportunity pass in which to further satiate her thirst for vengeance. "I say vengeance, for I know no better term. It would seem I had done her an irreparable injury in marrying the man she loved.

"What became of you, Ora, at that time, or how they got you, I cannot say. You were spirited away when I least expected such a blow at my peace. The odds were terrible against me. They were now aiming from ambush. I could not ferret them out. And Eola, my first child, was growing up in ignorance of her mother's wrongs.

"Soon I learnt, with horror—and it was by a note couched in most insulting terms, from Louise Ternor—that my husband was an active party in their war against me. What could I do? The record of my marriage was gone; my inhuman husband had hidden the certificate; all the witnesses were of no avail. I could not well face him with his guilt. But I did not yet despair. I had a brother remaining to me. Ah! where was he? I knew not. But I could search for him! Gathering what little funds were mine, I sought the far West. I will not weary you with recounting my privations and disappointments during that long, anxious, discouraging search.

"Newspapers were heralding the advent of a civil war. The country was in discord, and many bands of brave men passed me—going to preserve the honor of the nation! Providence assisted me at last. I saw, and knew the face of him who alone could aid me in my trying struggle; but he could not stay at my side then. His country called him; that first—and me next. Strong arms and gallant hearts were needed, and his own were pledged. He had amassed a great deal of money, and my immediate wants—not a few, for my funds were exhausted—were relieved.

"I have followed him in his proud career. I have been where cannon thundered, and rifles rattled the death-note for many a noble and unflinching man; where cavalry surged like seas of living steel, and corses piled the sod; beneath the hurling fury of opposing hosts. Through this—and always thinking of you, Ora, of Eola—of my wrongs.

"Three years ago, following the advice of my brother, I called on Harden Forde—my husband. I found him as I had left him: heartless. I offered to forgive if he would but quell the cruel rumors that spoke ill of me in Richmond, and restore my child—you, Ora. He laughed at my proposition, and said he knew nothing of you; that he had never seen you; and when I asked him for the crescent, he spurned me, bade me begone. Louise Ternor was still near him; though, in the same in-

ation with which she held him to her will, she also kept him from her.

"At the end of the war, brother and I went to Washington. While there we met an old, stanch friend of our family, who said he had seen Christopher Crewly, in Richmond, and that Crewly was looking for us. Filled with conjectures as to why he should desire to see us, and only too glad to find a living witness to my marriage, we immediately went to Richmond. But Crewly had gone to New York, to push his search. I came to Baltimore, and Walter continued to hunt for the lawyer.

"While here, I found that Louise Ternor had crowned her triumphs by a final blow at my husband. She wrote him a letter, and I gained possession of it. In view of this occasion, Ora, I have it in my pocket. Listen."

She drew a delicate billet from her pocket—one whose tinted pages were soiled, and whose sweet perfume had long since perished.

Ora listened raptly, while she read as follows:

"*To HARNDEN FORDE, the man I have duped and played with at my pleasure:*—

"Know, that all you have done to injure your wife, was to gratify my hatred! I loved you once as only a woman can love—with all the fiery ardor of a passionate nature. In marrying Bertha Blake, you turned that love into hate. Since the day of your marriage, I have followed, charmed, beguiled you; and my object has been your ruin. I have a paper which you were induced, by me, to sign, while under the influence of an intoxicating drug. It bears date, Dec. 20, 1853. It shall be held over you, to continue your unhappiness; and there will live, always, some one to see that the embers I have fanned into flame shall never die out. I bid you adieu, and may you never forget that the siren who wrought this, is Louise Ternor."

"And there is another," continued Bertha Blake, drawing a second epistle from her pocket, "which was written by the Fortune-Teller." And she read:

"*HARNDEN FORDE:*—

"By the time you get this I will be gone where you never can find me. But a word; never part with the Black Crescent. The moment it leaves your hands, for others', you are accursed. A lightning shaft could not be quicker in its course across the heavens, than your downfall before the world. It contains a charm no mortal knows, and you are only safe while you have it—so say the stars. Again, beware, there hangs over you a curse. In Time's unfoldings there may come a youth to win Eola's heart. Her heart will be his and they will wed. This youth will be your own child. The two children wedded, flesh of one flesh, blood of one blood, life of one life—say the stars. Then will earth cease to hold you; the fires of perdition will not receive you; Heaven will bar its gates to you; the graves will harbor naught but unrest to the despairing soul. Beware!"

"*MADAME FERNANDEZ:*—

"This, undoubtedly," resumed Bertha Blake, "was also written by Louise Ternor. You would ask her object! Her child, who was under the care of Gilson Bret, was now growing up. She was determined that her son should marry Eola, to continue the vent of her hatred. This I got from her own lips, on her death-bed. And the 'sayings of the stars,' were to bring about the desired end. Before Louise Ternor died—I forgave her—all she had done.

"During the absence of my brother Walter, I discovered your whereabouts, dear Ora, and you must know, full well, that I have not lost sight of you since, though I came very near doing so, it seems. In watching you, my child, I was also watching Bret and Haxon, the latter the son of my discarded enemy. I ascertained that they, in connection with a gang of thieves, had planned to rob the captain's safe, on the ferry. But I was not circumspect. They found me out, and I was seized by them, carried to a bateau at Locust Point, where they attempted to drown me.

"I owe my salvation to an old, white-haired negro, who was there, fishing by moonlight. He was near, in a skiff, and saw everything that passed. But for the lateness of the hour, and the deserted surrounding, he would have called for help; and besides, he feared for himself. My would-be murderers hurried back to shore immediately upon casting me into the water—never doubting that I would drown; for I was bound and gagged!

"Providence was still with me. I rose to the surface twice. At my second appearance, a stout man grasped me, and a kind voice spoke to me. When I recovered, I rewarded my preserver to the best of my ability, and I have never seen him since. Walter returned very soon afterward, and he had succeeded in finding Mr. Crewly. The lawyer had been bribed to steal the record; and his villainous employer subsequently attempted to poison him—"

"Fact, that is!" inserted Crewly, with a pucker of his lips and an emphatic nod, while his eyebrows twisted together like tiny snakes.

"He still had the record—has it now?"

"You see," interrupted the lawyer, deeming a word on his part very necessary at that juncture; "Forde first paid me to steal the will; then he sent me to Bristol, England, on business—which wasn't any business, but a goose-chase; and it turned out that he'd bribed a seaman—an ugly rascal, by the way! abem!—to poison me during the trip. See? But the fellow—dog!—wasn't read up in the art, and he gave me too much. Consequence: here—I—am!"

"It would seem," said Bertha Blake, addressing Ora, "that the clouds are, at last, going to clear away. And with you by me, my dear child, I know there is much happiness in store. I cannot speak of Eola; I fear she would not recognize me—her own mother—"

"Oh! yes, dear mother," exclaimed Ora, throwing her arms around Bertha Blake's (or rather Bertha Forde's) neck; "I am sure sister will love you as I do. I loved you so much when I first saw you, in that awful home not far from here; and now"—she did not finish the sentence, but pillow'd the golden tresses on her mother's bosom, in a way more speaking than words.

"And of father?" asked the gentle girl. "What are you going to do now?"

Bertha's brow clouded. Wat Blake frowned darkly; and Christopher Crewly, taking the answer upon himself, said, with another of those emphatic nods:

"Ahem! Send him up. Penitentiary. Boarding-house for rogues, etc. See?"

"Oh! no," pleaded Ora, her blue eyes radiant with the light of forgiving love; "you will not be cruel with him?—say that you will not. Wicked as he has been, may there not be penitence within him? Think: may not the voice that has spoken harshly, yet make amends with tender words?—the hand that has spurned you, yet gather you to him?—may not the lips that have syllabled affection's whispers in years past, once more imprint the kiss of love upon your brow, and call you 'wife' again, in tones so sweet, so familiar to your ear? Does not the great, good Being who gave us life, also grant us to repent of our sins?—though they be as scarlet? The Bible tells me so. And see—I have a little one here that has been my companion for years. Whenever I have felt sad, it has cheered me; and when I read it, I always see how sweet it is to forgive our enemies!"

She drew from her pocket a small Bible, and while her eyes were dim with the wet of tears, and the music of her voice tremulous with emotion, added:

"Read it—for my sake. It will teach you—to—forgive!"

Was it the eloquence in which she pleaded? Was it the gentle reproof at tardiness to forgive one who might, perchance, repent? Bertha clasped her in her arms, and while the tears fell thick from her weeping eyes, she sobbed:

"Ora! Ora! My child"—but could say no more. "

Wat Blake—great, strong man—looked on that picture, and Ora's words tingled in his ears.

Were there tears in his eyes? He could not say; but things in the room became very indistinct, as if it were nightfall, instead of midday.

Christopher Crewly acted very strangely. Something seemed to stick in his throat, that would neither come out or go down; and to relieve himself of the unpleasant sensation, he started up to look more closely at a painting on the wall.

Ab! Harnden Forde—what a powerful friend among those who had been so deeply wronged!

CHAPTER XVIII.

AUSTIN'S STORY.

"LET US not speak more of your father, just now," said Bertha at last. "I have not finished yet," and when Crewly with a twirl, a step and a bump, had again seated himself, she continued:

"I told you I was the youngest of my father's children. He had two; both girls. My sister married long before I saw Harnden Forde, and went with her husband from Richmond to Washington. Her choice was a bad

one. He was very reckless of his life when she first knew him, and it had been her hope to make a better man of him through the influence of her love. Ah! how few of such fond hopes are ever realized. He became worse after a while; his dissipations were such, that he lost all semblance of the man, and lived the likeness of a brute.

"When I married she had a child; that child was grown, was married, and she had a child. Meanwhile, her husband had deserted her, and she faded slowly, until her wasted form was finally laid at rest in the grave. As if all who came of her blood were doomed to a miserable existence, her child, shortly, was subjected to the same treatment on the part of a brute husband; and the reason was, my sister, in dying, had bequeathed her little fortune to her daughter in such a way that her young and reckless husband could not touch a cent of it.

"Then my niece's husband disappeared mysteriously. What became of him no one knew. My niece, gentle, timid, alone in a strange city, where she knew not one soul to call a friend—for her husband, brutal and jealous at the same time, had not allowed her to form any acquaintances—suddenly felt herself sinking. She knew not what ailed her, but knew that some fearful malady was creeping upon her. Hastily calling in her little fortune, she left Washington with her babe, and came to Baltimore. She had heard her mother say I was in this city, and she hoped to find me to give her child to me before she died.

"Every imaginable means was employed to discover my whereabouts, but she seemed kept from me by a cruel fate. Shrinking from the idea of placing her infant in an orphan asylum—though why she should I do not see; knowing no one whom she was warranted in trusting with so precious a charge, she did something bold, and hazardous too, thinking it for the best.

"Mustering the greatest strength of nerve, she carried the little babe, at dead of night, to the doorstep of a man of whom rumor spoke exceedingly well. Into the tiny hands that seemed to cling with the instinct of despair to the neck that would never meet their embraces more, she placed nearly all the money she had—almost twenty thousand dollars! Then, commanding her child to the care of God, she rung the bell and went away.

"What a trial! Oh! I could not have done it! And how unnatural for one possessing the money she did. But she lived to hear that the little waif had been taken in. Yes; for six months she lingered on, as if struggling against the clammy substance of Death, with no other object than to live: and in that time she was convinced that her child had fallen into good, kind hands and loving hearts.

"At last she died. But before she bade adieu to the bright, sunny world—a world that seemed darkened for her alone—she wrote a long letter, in which was penned all I am telling you of her mother—herself—her child. Hoping, in despair, that the letter would find its way to me, she mailed it. The fate which kept us separated, brought that letter to me, for it was by merest chance I happened to ask at the post-office window if there was anything for me. Stranger still, I got it the very next day—in time to attend her funeral. How my heart throbbed as I gazed down upon the sweet, mild face, so cold in death, and thought of what she had passed through—while I—I was so near, yet unknown.

"When Eola was given me, I knew her child must be then nearly three years old. I discovered its whereabouts, and would have taken it to myself, but that I saw it was attached to those who cared for it, and its life was being made a happy one. Considering what I have passed through, it is fortunate I did not intrude upon its haven. But it came to me, at last—came when the child had grown to be a man; and I have lived to do him service, for my niece's sake. By a strange coincidence, we often met, when he was very young, and I know, while he lay upon a sofa at my recent home, night before last, suffering from a wound inflicted by murderous enemies, he was striving to recall where he had seen me before."

"And where is he now?" asked Ora.

"In this house. We brought him here to elude his enemies, who are of that kind to hesitate at nothing tending to remove him from their path."

"And why does he have enemies, mother? The good make only friends."

"He is good, Ora; his sins against these wretches is in loving Eola—your sister. Louise Ternor's son, Harold, is determined to wed Eola. Harold Ternor—or Harold Haxon, as he is known—has constantly by his side this Gilson Bret, son of the pseudo fortune-teller, and the two are hard to deal with. We will soon bring about their overthrow, though, as their chief support is soon to—but, never mind; I have told you enough."

"But father?" questioned the fair girl, returning to her former inquiry.

"Wait, my child; wait."

"But you will promise? Oh! dear mother, please give me your promise."

"I can promise nothing—at present," said Bertha, with an effort; and just the slightest twinge of pain shot through Ora's heart at this refusal.

Further conversation was stayed by a light rap at the door.

Mrs. Lenner entered, her pleasant face wrinkled in smiles.

At sight of her, Crewly removed to a seat further from the door.

"Now there!" she exclaimed, looking from one to another; "here you be, all fixed as if you weren't never a-going to budge outen this room. An' the poor young man awake, too! Why, he says he feels first rate, only kind of lonesome like, an' he wants to know where he is, an' where you are, an' all that, while you're holding council an' forget all about him. Now, do come right in an' see him this minute."

They repaired to Austin's bedside.

Christopher Crewly brought up the rear, to avoid contact with Mrs. Lenner, who led the way. He had not forgotten her remark about the tea-kettle, and entertained, in consequence, no very high opinion of her intellectual culture.

The first utterance that escaped the young man's lips, upon their entrance, was an exclamation of surprise, and half-involuntarily he held out his hand to Ora.

In his rather confused state of mind, Ora's resemblance to Eola was so great as to completely deceive him.

"Eola, come to me."

"It is not Eola, Austin," said Bertha, smoothing back the glossy locks from his high, pale forehead.

"Not Eola? Who then? No—you are trifling with me."

Ora drew nigher, and tenderly took the outstretched hand.

"It is Eola's sister—my child," partially explained Bertha; and she added: "but, you are not strong enough to bear all I have to tell you. I see you are bewildered. Wait until your ugly wound is well."

But Austin Burns was destined to considerable activity long before the healing of his wound. In what way? We shall see.

All were introduced to the young man, and nearly an hour slipped pleasantly by; he being prevailed upon to ask no questions.

Crewly occupied a seat in one corner, where he was careful to keep Wat Blake between himself and Mrs. Lenner; and over Blake's shoulder he glowered, with ferocious gravity, upon that lady.

At the expiration of the time mentioned, Doctor Cauley joined them.

"Um! Young man's doing well—very well," he said, feeling Austin's pulse and frowning upon Christopher Crewly, who ogled contemptuously at the physician's proceeding.

"Keep him down. Small diet; jelly, fresh air; chicken; no wine; retain his horizontal and he'll soon be upright. Um!—well, sir?" the last to Crewly, who nearly upset his chair, in leaning forward to hear what the other said.

"Ahem!"—recovering his equilibrium—"pardon. Did I interrupt you?"

"No, sir."

"Is he well yet? That is—is—"

"No, sir; he's sick."

"Certainly. I thought so. You—a—you well?"

"Yes, sir—well," short and sharp.

"Family w—that is—is—"

"Are you troubled with the colic, sir?"

"Colic, sir!"—squirming in his seat—"no, sir! Me—hang it!—this chair—I—that is—" Crewly was embarrassed; and worse, he thought he saw Mrs. Lenner laughing at him.

"Does this belong to anybody in here?" A servant girl stood in the doorway, holding up Crewly's white umbrella.

The chair flew from under him; he reached the door at a bound, crying:

"Don't open it—don't!"

"One of the boarders was going out with it," explained the girl, and then departed.

Crewly slyly glanced inside the umbrella. Then he groaned. Something was missing. But he could not inquire after the lost article—oh, no!

Doctor Cauley soon withdrew.

Wat Blake, after a few seconds' conversation with his sister, started to leave the room, beckoning Crewly to follow.

"Where?" interrogated the lawyer, when they were upon the street.

"To Harnden Forde's."

"Deuce! Ahem! What for?"

"Dear little Ora has prevailed upon sister to call and see Forde, and ask him, *once more*, for the crescent and the marriage-certificate."

"No use," commented Crewly, with a snuffle.

"We will try," quietly.

"But what are you going there for, eh? What do you want me to go for, eh?"

"Bertha will come this afternoon. We are to be there as witnesses to the interview. She is also going to have him give a stronger pledge that Eola shall be the wife of Austin Burns. He has already promised in writing."

"But the Fortune Teller's letter? the fabricated prophecy, eh?"

"We hope to convince him of his foolish and useless superstition. If he refuses to accede, then, his dishonor be of his own making. And I shall secure the articles after all."

"Shall? How?"

"I am confident that I know where they are."

"But I say," whined Crewly, "I'm hungry. They were just going to dinner when we came away. Rather mean in you—"

"You can get something before we go to Forde's."

"Guy's!" exclaimed the lawyer, as they entered a car.

"Too far, Mr. Crewly."

"Oh, pooh! No difference; half a dozen hours ahead, you know. Besides, where can we be served like they serve at Guy's? To Guy's. I'm wolfish. Ever feel hungry, Wat Blake?"

Reaching their destination, Crewly darted down the steps to the restaurant, to satiate the cravings of the inner man.

Blake was not hungry, and awaited the lawyer on the corner.

CHAPTER XIX.

A BRUISER'S WAY.

The sound which startled Bret and Haxon as they stood within the deserted house, slowly drew nigher.

Step by step—light-footed, scarce audible its movements, the something approached.

"Look!" whispered Haxon, with a slight tremor; "the house is haunted."

"Bah!" exclaimed his companion; "haunted—thunder! Thought you didn't b'lieve in spooks?"

"See?" was the rejoinder.

Two flaming eyes appeared in the doorway—eyes that were red, yellow and green at the same time.

The bruiser drew a long sigh, then grunted, then laughed gutturally.

Haxon also felt cheap.

"Pscat!"

There was a spit, a scramble, a jump, a sound of pattering feet, and the object vanished.

"On'y a cat!" growled Bret; "an' it skeered you half to death."

Haxon could not deny that he felt uneasy during the few moments of their suspense; for entering a house with burglarious intentions was to him new, novel, and fraught with unpleasant sensations.

"Come on," added the bruiser, moving toward the kitchen. "Let's get out. There's nothin' here 'r us."

When they reached the street Haxon inquired, as they hurried away:

"What is to be done now, Gil Bret?"

"Get some stamps," was the illucid reply.

"Yes; but how?"

"Tiger!" he said briefly.

"Tiger!" echoed Haxon. "Why, man, we've got no money!"

"I reckon. Got eighty-eight cents. We'll build on that 're'ere."

"Build! Certainly you won't go to S—r's with such an amount? That's not enough for one stake!"

"You just come on now. I'm a-doin' this."

Gil Bret had no intention of entering a first-class saloon with only eighty-eight cents to buy chips—especially S—r's, where it was considered rather disgraceful to rustle less than a five-dollar bill.

Winding and turning through innumerable dark thoroughfares, he finally halted before a house on East street—a locality gloomy enough for the abode of a sorceress, to say nothing of its adaptabilities for a "sweat room."

In this establishment Bret felt at home with his small "pile"; and while he kept the game, Haxon did the betting.

The first deal over, Bret grew uneasy. Luck had cheated him. Only four chips left.

"Careful, Haxy," he said in an undertone. Haxon had ventured three of the four chips, covered.

"Good!" he exclaimed almost immediately. The cards began to run favorably.

The four chips increased to a dozen. Before long their eighty-eight cents had become three dollars.

"Come on," said the bruiser, throwing down his pencil, and getting his chips cashed.

They turned to leave the room.

Here was demonstrated one of the follies of entering a third-rate saloon.

Two roughs, whose money had been transferred, first to the bank, and then to the pockets of Bret and Haxon, stood before the door and, with glum countenances, barred their exit.

As they attempted to pass, one of these stretched forth his arm.

The action surprised Bret, then angered him.

For a second he contemplated the other, as if undecided whether to knock him down or bandy words.

Smothering somewhat of his choler, and clinching his fist with a determined coolness, he stepped up to him.

"No fighting here, gentlemen!" cried the man in charge, who saw that a row was imminent.

But his words came too late.

A few hasty words were exchanged, followed by a curse, a defiance, a shaking of fists, and—

"Thud! Bump!"

A head struck the door-jamb, and its owner with a howl sunk down.

"Look out!" screamed a voice.

Chairs swung in the air; a decanter whizzed close to Haxon's ear.

But the bruiser knew his place. The second rough followed his companion "to grass."

Bang! went a pistol. A ball shattered the lamp, and darkness prevailed.

There was a rush for the door, and every one bit who could.

"Well out of it!" exclaimed Bret, when he and Haxon had made their escape; and as they reached and turned down Baltimore street, he added:

"Now, then, for a room!"

A quiet, retired boarding-house was searched out, and the two were soon comfortably bedded.

"Just 'nough left to get breakfast in the mornin'," grunted the bruiser; and with this he rolled over, and soon began to snore.

Haxon did not sleep much. His mind was full of their situation.

With all his villainous composition of speech, action and brain, he lacked the cool, calculative principles of life which characterized his rougher but more solidly molded associate; and tossing restlessly, his thoughts fed by imaginary difficulties, he slumbered in fits—oftentimes starting wide awake, and endeavoring to pierce the surrounding black for some object upon which to rest his unnerved eyes.

At last he dozed off, dreaming of his hold upon Forde, his triumph over Eola, and the \$500 he promised himself on the morrow.

The two were not astir until after ten o'clock next morning.

"What can have become of Austin Burns is a puzzle to me," mused Haxon half aloud, and it would seem that Bret was beginning to wonder, also, how the young man could have so completely eluded their vigilance, for he said:

"An' me, too, Haxy; durned if I ain't bothered some!"

By chance their footsteps tended in the direction of Guy's.

They were quite near the corner opposite the restaurant, when Bret halted abruptly and grasped his companion's arm.

The Masked Mystery.

"What's the matter?" demanded Haxon.
"Look's there!"
"Where?"
"Over yonder. See that 'ere man standin' by the lamp! See 'im?"
"Yes. What of him?"
"That 'ere's Wat Blake—"
"Ha!"
"Sh! Don't make no fuss, now; that's him."

The two exchanged glances—glances that were significant, speaking like a silent telegraph, a sign in cipher.

Wat Blake stood with his back toward them; consequently their approach was unnoticed by him.

Cautious in two ways—not to attract his attention, nor that of passers-by—they drew near to him.

"Do't right, Haxy; don't bungle, an' we're all hunkie. Go for 'is inside pocket."

Nearer they came. Blake glanced about him; but having no suspicion of their proximity, and being just then interested by something in an opposite direction, he did not perceive them.

Presently some one struck Blake on the temple.

Confused, half-blinded, he reeled, and would have fallen, when a pair of muscular arms twined around him, pinioning him firmly.

"Now, Haxy!" But, almost before the words were spoken, Haxon's hand glided into the pocket of their victim and Gil Bret's pocket-book was drawn out.

"Fight! fight!" howled the cabmen on the other side of the monument, and a dozen of them made a dash for the scene flourishing their whips and screaming loudly.

But the action of the two villains was so quick, systematic, successful, that in the passage of a few seconds they had dashed off with their prize.

As Haxon turned the corner and ran after Bret, something descended with terrific force on his already ill used hat, and the latter went whizzing out into the gutter.

Christopher Crewly's umbrella again! And this time the lawyer felt certain his pet was irreparably injured, for he spent some moments in examining the article, heedless of the crowd that gathered around Wat Blake.

"Been robbed! Robbed in broad daylight! Who was it? How was it?" were the exclamations and inquiries that went round from lip to lip.

"Know the parties?" asked a sober policeman who was just in time to be too late.

"No," replied Blake, not fully recovered from the blow he had received, and looking thoroughly bewildered.

"What have you lost?" continued the officer.

Blake was not long in ascertaining his loss.

"A pocket-book."

"Valuable? Lodge a complaint. Detective—"

"No—no; it was not worth it. I—"

"Come—scatter!" ordered the policeman, dispersing the crowd. "There's nothing the matter now."

"Well, Wat Blake, another row, eh?" Christopher Crewly elbowed his way up to him.

"Yes, Mr. Crewly," returned Blake with a faint smile; "it seems that I am fated to continual difficulty of late. Do you know who it was—"

"Out of this rabble first. Rag, Tag, Bob-tail, Samuel, Richard and Henry assemblage is no place to talk. Hang it! get out of my way—rascal! you won't!" A street Arab seemed determined to block their way and Crewly treated him to an unkind lunge of his umbrella, causing him to retire with an unctuous howl of pain.

Once clear of the crowd, Crewly said:

"Now, Wat Blake, you've lost something."

"Yes—the pocket-book that I secured only last night!"

"Abem! Bad business! Hang those villains—"

"Who was it?"

"Well, Way, who could it be but Harold Haxon—as he calls himself—and that other dog, Gil Bret? Nearly broke my umbrella over 'em. Haxon'll have to buy a new hat this time—sure. Nothing but the pocke'-book?"

"Nothing else. Miserable wretches!—I do not grudge them that; for I guess they must be pretty near starving. But, no more of it. It is a matter of little consequence."

"All right. Bad luck, though, you got."

"Ah—yes; it was severe."
"Now then, to Forde's."
"To Forde's," assented Blake, and they started toward Eutaw street.

CHAPTER XX.

A BAFFLED TRAIL.

The sight of two men running at the top of their speed—and one of these fashionably attired and bareheaded—very naturally attracted a deal of attention.

Several "Arabs" greeted them with bowls and cries, and as they dashed on through the street not a few pedestrians paused to look at them, wonderingly.

Bret was in the lead, panting and blowing—for the run was a severe one. Two squares were passed over before Haxon closed up the space between them.

"Got it!" spat the bruiser, between breaths.

"Yes."
"Where's your hat?"
"Gone. That man knocked it—"

"What man?"
"The same who appeared on the scene at the gates last night. I knew him by his tall form; and now I am sure it was an umbrella that struck me. I'll be even with him yet for his interferences!"

"An' who in thunder is he?"
"I know not—wait. Come, quick!—in here, and we're safe."

They were before Haxon's boarding-house. In a twinkling they entered and proceeded upstairs.

When the door of the room was closed and locked, they threw themselves into chairs and looked at each other.

"Perty well done, Haxy—that was; hey?" said the bruiser presently.

Haxon turned his attention to the pocket-book.

At sight of it Bret's eyes half closed in a broad grin.

"Open it, Haxy. The game'sourn ag'in! We're all right; open it."

The contents of the pocket-book were at once examined into.

Haxon's face lighted up as he drew forth several greenbacks, and Bret looked on in silence.

"Forty dollars and a few cents."

Bret's countenance fell a little—fell, but was not altogether without evidences of pleasure at the announcement. He was glad to get the money, but he was not yet satisfied.

"Go on," he said, "look again. There's somethin' else."

"Nothing more," returned Haxon, overhauling the pocket-book more thoroughly.

"Othin'?"

"Nothing."
"Here—let me look."

Bret snatched it from him, and in a moment tossed it on the floor.

"Not there, by thunder!"

"What is not there?"

"Why, the paper!"

Haxon seemed to have forgotten that Bret had told him the valuable paper was in the stolen pocket book.

"Is this your pocket-book?" he asked.

"Thunder—of course!"

Then, as usual, he betrayed no further sign of chagrin. To an observer, he was as cool as if he had never known a disappointment in all his life.

"This money will last us for a while," said Haxon, "and I shall soon have more to put with it. Everything will be satisfactorily arranged before long, for our whole future. Forde need not know—why should, and how can he?—that we no longer hold the paper with which to bind him to our will. And once married to Eola, our bark will glide smoothly enough. She is worth a fortune in her own right—left her by the brother of her grandfather. That much I have found out during my visits there."

"When're you goin' up there?"

"I told him I would call again to-day. My reception yesterday was cold as ice and painful as caustic. The girl has a spirit fiery as hot iron—once struck upon, the sparks fly promiscuously."

"You ain't got a hat."

"You'll go get me one, Bret. I guess there was not enough seen of you in our little game to have you spotted. Besides, we will avoid the vicinity of Guy's in the future."

Looking at his watch, he added:

"You'd better be off at once, too. It's already after noon. I would like to get there in time for dinner. Forde sets an excellent table. Hurry, now."

Bret started out to purchase a hat for his companion, who was, perchance, a prisoner until the article was bought.

About half-past one Harold Haxon entered a car for Eutaw street.

Bret sought a restaurant on Holliday street, near the theater, where he partook of a substantial lunch and a few "settlers."

Harold Haxon, in a state of exuberance over the successful game which he flattered himself he was playing, ruminated upon his prospects as the car slowly neared his destination.

When he alighted he was surprised to see the windows of Forde's house closed.

"Strange!" he thought, as he ascended the steps and pulled the bell.

He repeated his summons three times before it was answered.

"What can be the matter?" he wondered, and then he paled slightly. "Can anything have happened to Forde? 'Sdeath! if so, then my plans are ruined—Oh!"

James stood in the doorway.

"Well, James, Mr. Forde in?"

"No, sir"—briefly.

Haxon started, and looked hard into the servant's countenance.

"Indeed! Gone for a ride, eh?"

"No, sir."

"Then, where is he?" impatiently.

"Left town, sir."

"Left town!" and Haxon repeated the words in amazement. "You say he has left town?—when?"

"Last night, sir."

"Did Eola go with him?"

"Miss Forde went with her father"—the first two words rather emphatically spoken.

"But where to?"

"That I can't say, sir."

"Ab, you can't say!" He caught something from the man's words; "but you know."

"I've got nothing to say, Mr. Haxon. I can't—tell—where they've gone."

James saw a dollar-bill in the other's hand; but he was too tried a servant to betray his employer's secrets.

Forde had given him instructions before leaving, and these instructions were made impressive by both money and promises—to say nothing of James's natural integrity.

"You are mistaken in me, sir," in answer to a wink from Haxon.

"You won't tell?"

"No—sir!"

Here was a dilemma. Here was news to set the villain's hair on end with rage!

Forde had escaped him, at least for a while.

Gone. Where?

What use in the inquiry?

He saw that James was not to be approached, and turning abruptly on his heel, he left—not failing to hear the door shut with a bang that must have meant gratification at his departure.

If Harold Haxon was at all a handsome man, that feature was lost in the fierce scowl, the pale cheeks, the compressed lips and flaming, flashing eyes, which marked his appearance as he strode down the street.

He gazed down at the pavement with savage glance, and, between gritting teeth, he cursed the fate which led him to grant Forde a single hour in which to prepare Eola for her sacrifice.

"Did I not have him in my power—like a felon inside the prison wall?" he muttered. "Could I not have crushed him at a single blow, if he dared refuse immediate action on my demand? Was not everything convenient to my desires? And then, that I—fool! fool!—should have allowed the prize to slip my grasp so easily! Curses!—it is Eola's doing! That girl—fiends seize her!—will thwart me yet, if there is much delay. I will crush them both! Yet, in reality, I am powerless, having lost the paper. May the shades of ruin fall upon you, Harold Forde, for this defiance! But you have not escaped me—no! I will ferret you out, though the task may lead me thrice around the globe! And I have one to assist me, whose scent is keen as that of the sleuth-hound!"

Gil Bret had just finished his meal when Harold Haxon strode into the room.

It had been arranged that they should meet there; but, by the surprise Bret evinced, it

was evident he did not expect his partner back so soon.

Frowning, breathing hard, excited, Haxon appropriated a chair and slapped down his hat violently on the table.

"Careful, Haxy; that 'ere hat cost seven dollars," eying the other, coolly.

"Well, Gil Bret," fell from Haxon's lips, in a strained tone, "I have some news."

"News, eh? Is 't all right? Got things fixed? Gal in a good humor? Day set—"

"That would be news!" with a deeper frown, and a fierce light in the dark eyes.

"Then spit it out. What's up?"

"Well, they're gone!" Haxon communicated the news with a snappish accent, and leaned half-way across the table, to speak in a lower tone.

"Gone! Hump! You mean Forde—"

"Who else?" cried Haxon, biting his lips in vexation at the quiet way in which Bret received the intelligence.

"An' where have they gone to, eh?"

"I do not know—cannot find out. I tried to bribe the servant, and only got snubbed for my pains. Now what's to be done? Say? Will you ever wake up to the realization of trouble, when we get into it?"

"Now, just you keep cool—"

"Cool, Gil Bret!" starting up and glancing half wildly.

"There ain't no use in all this 'ere fumin' every time your hip's pinned. Just— Well, what d'you want?"

"I say, mister, why I've run like snakes, all the way from Eutaw street after you! I saw you 'n the car—but I couldn't get in, 'cause I hadn't no money. I saw you at the old gent's house, up on Eutaw, an' I knew 'at you was asking for the fam'ly; an' I didn't s'pect you foun' out what you wanted to know—judgin' from the ugly look you give that 'soupy' at the door. An' I thought, why, 'at maybe you'd like to know somethin' 'at I know, an' so, why, I come after you."

It was the newsboy who had been paid by Haxon to give Austin Burns the false note.

He addressed himself to Harold Haxon.

Harold Haxon contemplated the ragged urchin who had intruded upon them, and whose words were so significant to the villains.

About fourteen years old, with a countenance stamped with intelligence, and the openness of which was only marred by sundry dirt-stains and not a few bruises—as if he combined in his wild nature a propensity for fighting—and there was that in his bright, piercing eyes and peculiar speech which demanded attention.

Bret and Haxon exchanged glances.

"What is it you want to tell me?" asked the latter.

"I ain't got nothin' I want to tell you," was the reply, with a knowing glance; "but there's somethin' I can tell you, if I'm a mind."

"And what is that?" continued Haxon, surveying the bedraggled garments of the youth.

"Well, now, you must take me for a green 'un, don't you? I've got somethin' to tell about the old gent up on Eutaw, an' his gal—crimminy! she's red warm!—she is."

"Look 'e here, younker," said Bret, "if you've got anythin' to say, why 'n thunder don't you spit it out? We'll give you—"

"Give us the ducats!" holding out his dirty hand.

Haxon placed a quarter in the outstretched palm, wondering what the boy could have to communicate, relative to Forde.

After pocketing the money, the little fellow said:

"Now, you'd like to know where them folks on Eutaw's gone to!"

"Can you tell us?" Haxon spoke quickly, eagerly, and grasped the boy's arm.

"Hold on now, you; that's the on'y coat I've got. Don't you bu'st a hole in it—"

"Tell me what you know about Forde and the girl!" was the impatient interruption.

"That purty gal with the golden hair an' eyes like indigo!"

"Yes, yes; be quick!"

"Well, they've gone out of the city—"

"Bah!" exclaimed Bret, "we knew that 'ere long ago."

"Yes; but I reckon you don't know where they've gone," with the air of one who assumes the importance of exclusive knowledge.

"Boy!" Haxon hissed, angrily; "I've paid you to tell me what you know. If you know where the parties have gone, and can put me on their track, I'll give you half a dollar more."

"Will you? Crimminy! Well now, they've just gone to Washington, an' nowheres else. That's all."

"To Washington!" two mouths uttered the exclamation simultaneously.

Striking the table a forcible blow with his fist, Bret declared, vehemently:

"By thunder!—Haxy, I bliere it!"

"How do you know this?" questioned Haxon, with a slight doubt as to the reliability of the information.

"Well, I was sellin' papers right by the window, down to the depot, las' night, an' I saw 'em. I was clos't enough to see 'at the tickets was for Washington. I knew 'em, 'cause I've of'en lef' a paper at the old gent's house, and there's where I seen his gal, too. Then, to day, here I see you a-askin' after 'em at the front door; an' I seen you go 'way mad like, as if you couldn't find out what you wanted to. Then, thinks I, Jack—here's stamps! 'cause I knew you was good pay. So I come after you. An' there's the whole on't." This speech in a brief, concise, comprehensive delivery, that would have been creditable to the argument of a lawyer.

The additional half-dollar was paid over, and the boy departed, counting, in mind, how many *Bulletins* he would buy for that night's sale.

With one impulse, Bret and Haxon left the restaurant.

Without losing a moment, they took a car for Howard street.

Their destination was Washington—their object to find Harden Forde.

Satan favored them in sending the newsboy—who dreamt not of the harm he was doing—to relieve them of their embarrassment; for, plain it was, that, without the unlooked-for aid, they were completely baffled.

Already, they were hounding after their prey. Once found—Haxon's eyes gleamed like the orbs of a devil, as he anticipated once more grinding beneath his heel, the proud gentleman who had thus far felt but the smoothest sting of the venomous serpent hovering upon his path.

Not alone the fierce ardor of determination to wed Eola now fired the breast of the scheming villain; but with it mingled an inward vow to punish Forde for daring to defy him.

They were too late for the afternoon train, and a tiresome period must elapse ere the departure of the four o'clock cars.

Passing their time, partially in the bar-room, and in walking the platform, the time slipped by.

People were purchasing tickets and crowding to their seats.

Bret and Haxon stood upon the hind platform of the last car, watching the thronging passengers, when, suddenly, and at the same moment, the two stood transfixed, as if powerless to move a muscle.

That which they saw appeared to startle them.

CHAPTER XXI. CROSS-PURPOSES.

WAT BLAKE and the lawyer lost no time in going to Forde's house.

They were not a little surprised to find it closed and dreary-looking (it was one of those old-fashioned buildings which, nowadays, require all the dressing and brilliancy of openness and embellishment, to prevent the passer-by imagining it a historical sepulcher) as if the occupants had deserted it.

"Buried himself, I reckon," said Crewly, surveying the building as though in doubt whether to risk his body inside the doorway. "Looks like he'd been sold out by the sheriff," and now he stood still at the bottom of the steps.

"Come on, Mr. Crewly," said Blake, ringing the bell as he spoke.

"Any danger?" inquired the lawyer, dubiously.

"Danger of what?"

"Bless me! I don't know. But it seems like going into a tomb."

At this point James opened the door. Seeing two strangers, he bowed respectfully.

"Mr. Forde in?" asked Blake.

"No, sir; he is not," in a polite tone.

"Not in! But he will be, shortly! I sup-

pose we may step in and wait until his return—"

"Mr. Forde's left town, sir."

A scarce perceptible frown appeared on Blake's brow; and Crewly, screwing his mouth into its habitual pucker, looked at the servant with the hardest scrutiny of his expressionless eyes. Then the lawyer stroked his chin and said, wisely:

"There's a spider in our dumpling! or, to be idiomatic, our flea's jumped!"

Blake asked no more questions, and turned away.

"How's that for beat?" Crewly inquired, when they had walked a short distance.

Wat Blake was unusually silent. Forde gone! Did he mean to defy him?—to defy Bertha's order? And, finally, was the object of his flight to escape them, that he might sacrifice Eola?

The reader knows how to answer these questions, but Wat Blake did not, and his mind was so absorbed that he paid no heed to his companion's remark.

"Umph! lost your tongue, eh, Wat Blake?"

"Mr. Crew'y, I am perplexed,"—striving to shake off the unpleasant surmises which volumed in his brain. "I can not think otherwise than that Forde has fled, in order to defy us and satisfy the demands of Harold Haxon. Yet, how can that be?"—relapsing into his meditative humor—"when he knows we will not permit his escape!—we will not allow the consummation of such villainy—"

"What's the new dodge with them, eh?"

"Why, to have Eola marry Harold Haxon."

"Oh, yes; certainly. I forgot. Excuse me."

"I am in a quandary," pursued Blake; and Crewly inserted with comical gravity:

"Whether it is better to stay beat, or prove one's self a plotter for one's good. See! Now then, wake up. Ahem! No time to lose. Forde's vamoosed. So. Logic: after him, with a jump—"

"But how?"

"Ay, there's the rub!" finished Crewly, in the words of the poet; and he added: "Now, you see, or you don't see, but you ought to, and maybe you will—they've left town."

"Yes."

"Exactly. And we're to find out where they've gone."

"Yes, yes; but I ask again, 'how?'"

"Well, that's something I can't say." What little hopes had been inspired by the lawyer's manner were dashed down by these words; and Blake felt a slight anger toward the other for his delusive speeches.

But Crewly had accomplished his object. Blake was aroused, and he walked along faster.

They repaired straightway back to Mrs. Lenner's boarding-house.

In fact, Blake was very anxious to return there soon; fearing that Bertha might start for Forde's.

She had not gone out when they arrived, and was, with Ora, in Austin's room.

Wat Blake, upon entering, threw himself into the nearest chair, without a word. He wore a frown, and seemed bent upon maintaining a mysterious silence.

Crewly was, also, silent; but his movements were more elaborate than Blake's. Gently depositing his hat on the table, and standing his umbrella in the corner, he appropriated a chair, twisted his lank limbs, worm-like, together, and letting his pointed chin fall between his hands—while his elbows were insecurely fixed upon the arm-rests—he gazed steadfastly at the carpet, as if striving to remind himself of something he could not recollect.

Bertha marked the troubled look on her brother's face, and knew that some unusual circumstance had crossed him.

"Has anything happened, Wat?" she asked, quietly:

"Yes," he said, and the tone was so vehement that Crewly's arm slipped, and that individual jumped all over.

The lawyer's comical figure evidently broke the spell of Blake's half-sullen state, for he added, more calmly:

"Yes, sister, something has happened. Forde has left the city."

She started visibly; and Austin Burns, at mention of the father of his betrothed, listened interestedly.

The Masked Mystery.

"Gone, Wat!" Bertha exclaimed. "Where to?"

"I do not know."

"But did you not ask?"

"Hang it!" said Crewly; "it's all Wat Blake's fault. No—ahem! we forgot to ask anything about it. Positively."

Bertha was somewhat excited by the intelligence they brought. At first, she could not realize it; then it burst upon her.

"He must be found!" she cried. "It will never do to let him escape us in this way—never!"

"How can it be helped?"

"But it *must* be helped!—must, I say," was her quick rejoinder. "Are we to be so easily baffled? You do not know Harnden Forde as I do. Can you not see his plan? He flees from us that he may gratify the wishes of Harold Haxon! Eola will be sacrificed! Oh, Heaven! Back!—back to his house, and ask where he has gone. There are servants there. They will tell you—"

"My dear madam—" began Crewly, seriously.

"Mr. Crewly, be quiet!" she interrupted, and he subsided.

Pacing the room, her dark eyes flashing with excitement, and the pale cheeks for a moment flushed with a delicate tinge, she was, even at her advancing age, a handsome woman; and the impatient fire of her youthful days seemed now to heat her veins.

Blake did not move. Pausing before him, she said, rapidly:

"Up, brother; up and off! Oh! don't lose a moment. He must not escape us. He must be tracked!—tracked! Eola is in danger!—my child! Will you not go?" and she clasped her white hands to her throbbing temples, as if a sudden pain had centered there to agonize her.

Wat Blake arose. Crewly, anxious to be on hand in everything, squirmed from his seat and, in his eagerness to depart, very nearly forgot both hat and umbrella.

"Bless me!" he exclaimed, wriggling back across the room; "can't go bareheaded, much, you know; positively. Excuse me," and he followed Blake, with two-yard strides.

"What was that I heard you say of Harnden Forde?—and Eola?" inquired Austin, when the two had gone.

Ora had remained a silent spectator of all that passed, and said nothing now.

For some moments, Bertha seemed unable to calm herself. Then she advanced to his bedside, and told him all; how Harold Haxon was determined to wed Eola, and the power used by the villain to grind Forde to his will. But while she told him of the false prophetess, and the latter's league with Louise Ternor, she was, at the same time, careful not to speak of herself or her sufferings. Neither did she acquaint Austin with his identity.

"And this, then," murmured the young man, "is why Harnden Forde cast me off?"

"It is. But be of good cheer, Austin; you will be righted soon, if Heaven does not desert us in this trying moment. Oh! why don't they come back? Why don't they come?"

Her excitement had given place to extreme nervousness, and Ora, with soothing words, strove to calm her.

"Patience, dear mother," she said, her bright blue eyes beaming and her ripe lips wreathing a smile of encouragement; "all will yet be well, I am sure. Try and calm yourself, for my sake."

Bertha kissed the pure brow of her child, and tried to be patient.

Austin was reflecting deeply upon the story he had heard. And in his thoughts dwelt an impatient count of the hours he would be compelled to lie there, idle and helpless, while Eola—his own dear prize!—was threatened by the machinations of a heartless, desperate, ay, *blood-thirsty* villain; for Bertha had named the wretch who committed the murderous assault at the Fayette street bridge.

The young man's reveries were interrupted by the entrance of Dr. Cauley. Feeling Austin's pulse the physician said, gravely:

"Madam, there's something wrong. Um! young man's excited—considerably excited. What's the matter, sir?"—to Austin—"your heart thumps; your pulse jumps; your brow is feverish—"

"I want air," said Austin, who could think of nothing but Eola; "I am nearly choking! I must get up!"

"Choking! Wonderful! Get up? Ridicu-

lous! Madam, has he been eating anything injurious? Strange case—very Remarkable! Left him improving this morning; now he's in a high state of excitement. Dangerous! Madam, I ask what's the matter?"

Despondency oftentimes chills the lip; and palsies the voice; and Bertha, in striving to be calm, had grown despondent.

She only looked at him and smiled as she shook her head; while he rattled on:

"Young man, retain your—hold wrist still!—senses, and wait till I feel your pulse again! explain what's—very queer case!—the matter, eh? Extraordinary! Um!—m m!"

Wat Blake and Christopher Crewly returned at that juncture.

At sight of the physician, the lawyer elevated his nose and retired, with dignity, to a far seat.

"Well, Wat—well; you found out?" Bertha ran forward to meet her brother.

"No—"

"Oh, Heaven!—"

"Wait, sister; calm yourself. I have done the best I could—"

"Fact!" indorsed Crewly in a breath that betrayed utter exhaustion. "The servants know, but they won't tell us—hang 'em! not a bit."

"But what are we to do?" she cried. "He has eluded us. Oh! Wat, Wat, do you think of Eola?—of the fate that may be hers? Do you—" She was interrupted by an exclamation from Dr. Cauley.

"But, my dear sir! Retain—really, now! no—your senses—you must not, I say!—Impossible! Don't do it! Kill yourself!"

"Clear the room!" Austin cried, as he struggled in the grasp that held him down. "I tell you that I will get up. Eola must be found! If there be a way, I have both the will and the strength. She is in danger! Let go, doctor. If one servant in Forde's house knows where she is, and will not tell me, I'll wring his neck! Clear the room. I will get up!"

Crewly leaped from his seat.

"Good! That's it!" he exclaimed. "Let him up, Doctor Quidley! Clear out, all of you. Fly! Let him up!"

Whether it was to oblige Austin, or whether she meant to visit Forde's house, herself, Bertha ran from the room to procure her hat and shawl, and Ora followed her.

Dr. Cauley now changed his remonstrances to words of emotion, lest the wound might take a fresh start and begin to bleed.

Christopher Crewley disappeared.

But the lawyer soon returned, saying he had a cab at the door.

He put on of the general excitement—his hat perched on the back of his head, long coat flying loosely, and umbrella occasionally flourishing aloft, he danced, jumped, squirmed around them in a half frantic state.

Austin was placed inside the vehicle, with Bertha, Ora and Wat Blake, and, with a defiant smirk at Dr. Cauley, the lawyer mounted to a seat beside the driver, saying:

"Now, go like the deuce!—only be very careful. Go! Avoid the ruts. Go! Take the railroad track. Skoot!"

Arrived at Forde's house, James answered the violent pull at the bell. Austin Burns supported by Blake and Crewley, stood on the steps.

"James," cried the young man, hot with the determination to learn of Eola's whereabouts, "where is Mr. Forde?—where is Eola? Answer me! I am not to be trifled with. Tell me quickly, too. You know me; you know I am one to keep my word; and I tell you James, if I do not obtain the information I seek, there shall be suffering—"

"And weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth!" put in Crewley, with a scowl at James.

Quite unexpectedly, the servant said:

"I'll tell you, Mr. Burns; but I wouldn't tell anybody else."

"Then be quick!—quick!" Austin's impatience was without bounds.

"Do you hear?—quick!" said Crewley, resolved to have a word.

"Well, Miss Forde gave me a letter for you, Mr. Burns—"

Without more ado, James produced the letter, and, in a second, Austin was reading as follows:

"DEAR, DEAR AUSTIN:

"To escape—what, I cannot say—father and I have gone to Washington. I must see you, for my

poor heart is nearly breaking, and my strength failing, under a great tax that I can not now explain. Follow me as soon as you can. Your own EOLA."

With a laugh which was half that of a maniac—so great was the reaction from despair to joy—the young man turned and staggered down the steps, toward the cab, breaking from his supporters, who sprung after him, fearing he would fall.

"To Washington!" he gasped, sinking back upon the cushions.

"Now—abem! look, if you don't take things more coolly, you'll have brain fever. Fact?" declared Crewly, with the air of an emphatic philosopher; and turning to Wat Blake, he continued:

"Where to, now? Better keep Burns quiet or—Step! there's my umbrella upon the steps." James considerately brought him the valued article.

Blake consulted his watch.

"Three o'clock. The train leaves at four. So we have an hour yet. Back to Mrs. Lerner's."

Again the lawyer mounted to the box, and the cab drove off.

In due time, they were at the depot, and Crewly, having purchased the tickets, exclaimed, while he jammed his hat tighter on his head, and thumped his umbrella on the planks:

"Now, then, we're after 'em with a hot stick. Ahem! Hurry up! Cars are going."

Sight of this party was what startled Bret and Haxon, as these two, also in pursuit of Forde, stood upon the platform of the car.

But the villains were not seen. Bret, being the first to recover from his surprise, pulled Haxon backward, into the car, in time to escape observation.

CHAPTER XXII.

CHRISTOPHER CREWLY SEES A SIGHT.

WASHINGTON, February 20. The Carnival.

How many readers will glance twice at that date, and a momentary thrill pervade them as they recall to mind the great National Festival!

Ushered in through portals crimsoned by its flaming disk, the red sun dipped upon the far-off horizon—then lit in splendor all that dwelt beneath.

A day whose glory vied with those of distant Shiraz, where dews are life and every breath an incense, dawned upon the world; and twinkling stars, ashamed before the day-god's glint, were paling soft as night's tears on the petals of a rose.

The very skies were smiling on this promised day of rejoicing—for it was no less; and in the breasts of thousands who had thronged to the gay capital, hearts were already bounding with delight.

Balmy as the early days of fall, when sweetest flowers weigh their fragrance on the passing air; seeming like a lovely, wandering rose whose lot had wrenched it from repose in Iran's bowers, to stray and halt amid the clime of snows and frosts; wasted like a choice celestial ray to break the chilly spell of winter, while nature stood in awe at its own change; beautiful below, and in the boundless azure, where fleecy mists whose silent flights were like the soaring isles of spheres that charmed the eye with mystic forms, then faded into naught—such was the gift of Providence.

Ne'er knew the streets a grander dress than decked them then, for all who lived, lived but for pleasure's will; and like the pending burst of something to enrapture, the hours marched quickly onward.

Pennsylvania avenue threw off its look of dreariness seared with dust, and, like the famed Corso, reveled in its show.

Had hosts of Peris lifted mighty Rome and borne it to our midst? What dreams! And yet, to mark the universal draping of the balconies, the rich and countless shades and glittering hues that blazoned every window, and even clothed the trees with colors shimmering in rarity; to see the burrying carriages, with merry occupants, and prancing horses chafing at the bit; to know that heavy cannon waited to belch forth the rumbling thunder of their voice—our fancy turns to Rome, and one thing, alone, remained to give the scene its blending with the Carnival as it should be: the confetti showers.

Weeks had passed since we left our characters in the last chapter; and in that time, Wat

Blake had striven, vainly, to discover the whereabouts of Harnden Forde and Eola.

The brief note Austin had received, failed to say where he should look for his betrothed, and the young man, despite his wound, which was beginning to pain him severely, had exhausted all his patience in the search.

Hotel registers were examined, with no satisfactory result; Christopher Crewly, in his eccentric nature had daringly faced many a masculine boarding-house-keeper, with inquiries.

And Bertha, returning day after day, to their secluded rooms on First street east, always brought the same words:

"Not found."

Matters were, indeed, embarrassing. It required all the guileless art of gentle Ora's lips, to soothe and calm her mother in the hope that the kind Providence that had so far watched favorably over them, would at last bring them to those after whom they sought. Ora's sweet faith in Heaven was sublime!

It was after nine o'clock.

The grand stands were filling rapidly with eager sight-seekers, and the pavements crowded with moving masses. Windows, balconies, house-tops and every conceivable place from which a view of the great kaleidoscope below could be obtained, were darkened with the forms of those who laughed and cried out in a spirit that bespoke the fullness of their abandonment to the prevailing enthusiasm.

Flags and streamers flaunted gayly to the breeze; across the avenue, at intervals, were arranged triangular ropes, to which were suspended fluttering ensigns; and the head-quarters of the committee who had wrought this grand panorama of elegance, beauty, mirth and life, unusual to dull, sleepy Washington—appeared as a vast picture of gorgeous imagery, in which the fantastic image on the front of the building formed an admirable center.

Even the habitual toper seemed to have forgotten his customary drink, in the general excitement; for intoxication was rarer than on other holidays.

Soon the grand stand at Seventh street was packed. Countless pretty faces wreathed with smiles, or, anon, a parting of coral lips in rippling laugh exposed the pearly teeth of dashing fair ones whose cheeks were flushing with the heat of gayety.

Among the throng on the pavement, before the stand, moved Wat Blake and those who were bent upon the same mission as his own, in the city; yet even they seemed to forget the object of their pursuit, in watching the showy equipages now whirling along and out of the avenue, to clear off for the races.

Austin Burns was not with them. Complaining of his wound, he had preferred to remain in the house.

Swift steeds were speeding past, as if on wings—their sinewy limbs glistening in the sunlight, and fiery nostrils dilated by their panting breath; the hum of hilarious voices rose like murmurs of a lisping breeze through boughs of rustling verdure; and here and there a laugh, a cry, a shout aroused fresh impetus to still greater warmth of gushing spirit.

In the minds of those who saw the Carnival, is fixed a picture whose sublimity will only perish with the loss of memory.

"I say!" whined Crewly, who was continually losing sight of those who accompanied him.

But they did not hear, and the crowd jostled him still further from his friends each moment.

"I say, Wat Blake!" in a key pitched so high that it ended in a squeak.

Blake turned around in time to see his long, tall, cranky friend punch an obstinately immovable urchin with his umbrella, then apologize to a lady, for having trod on and ripped several tucks out of her dress.

"Come on, Mr. Crewly."

"Coming—hang it! Let me get through here!" cried the lawyer, making a frantic effort to force his way.

"Careful whose toes you tread on!" growled a portly gentleman.

"Take 'em home and put 'em out of the way, then!" shouted Crewly, in his ear.

"Fight!" yelled a greasy boot-black, hoping to start a row; for which attempt, a white umbrella unceremoniously descended on his head.

With Wat Blake's assistance, the lawyer extricated himself, and the whole party continued eastward, across Seventh street, past the bare

corner in front of St. Marc, and proceeded on where the crowd was not so dense.

As they passed beneath the avenue windows of the St. Marc, one of the young ladies who were ensconced there for the day, treated Crewly to an orange-peel which nearly broke the crown of his hat.

He looked up to say something crushing, when Wat Blake stopped suddenly short, and the lawyer collided with him.

"Oh!" gaspingly—"Excuse me—"

"Look there, Crewly!" interrupted Blake.

Standing near the curb-stone, evidently intent with gazing at the brilliant displays out on the street, were Harold Haxon and Gil Bret.

Perhaps Blake spoke too loud, considering their nearness, for at the same moment, Haxon turned and faced them.

Simultaneously, with the villain's discovery of their presence, Christopher Crewly, as if inspired with some ungovernable motive, sprung forward, his umbrella uplifted, and the worn silk hat tumbling from his head in the suddenness of his movement.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A RACE FOR LIVE GAME.

WE have said that weeks had passed since we left the pursuing parties on the cars at the depot in Baltimore.

How chilled with unhappiness were at first those weeks to Eola!

Each cold blast that whistled in on winter's wings seemed to grow more icy in its wailing voice and fell upon the young girl's ear with saddened, mournful sound.

How different this winter to those she had been accustomed to pass amid the warmth and gayety that ever cheered her father's house prior to the events which led to their flight. She missed the pleasant parties, soirees and countless other bright features of life which had hitherto figured in her unclouded existence; and the young heart chafed in the shadows that hovered for the first time on her pathway.

But, how nobly had she striven to banish the enervating broodings which at times crept upon her.

Her face was schooled to smiles that, while they deceived the one for whom they were forced, betrayed how severe the tax she imposed upon herself; yet the lips spoke naught but words to encourage him whose only strength was in her resignation and promises of abiding love.

Harnden Forde had told his daughter all.

Yes, with quivering lips, he poured the whole story of his past life into her timid ears, and, weeping like a child, he intermingled the sad narrative of his wife's wrongs, with moans of penitence.

The discarding of Bertha; the infatuation that held him to Louise Ternor's will—the woman of whom he could speak but as a beautiful demon; his attempt upon the life of the Richmond lawyer, whom he had bribed to steal the marriage record; the theft of the Black Crescent at the instigation of the woman whose wish had once been his law; the spurning of his outraged wife, when, after all her suffering, she had come to him and offered a forgiveness which he had set aside with harsh words; the final desertion of the siren who had wrought his ruin—and her note of Satanic triumph; the letter of warning from the fortune-teller, who, even then, he believed to be a reader of the stars and true Prophetess of Fate; the horrible, meaning contents of that letter—all this was told her, and her heart had near stood still as she listened to the fearful detail.

But it was past. Harnden Forde had kept his promise to his child, and Eola, true to her own pledge, tried in every way to cheer her stricken and repentant parent back to the semblance of his former self.

She would smile even in those hours of absolute misery; for what but misery to know that a father who held the precious affection of a pure, saint-like child was after all a mere villain who had sought willfully the destruction of his wife, and torn from that wife the dearest gems on earth—her children?

He repented. Upon this Eola built her comfort, with promises that Heaven would not deny forgiveness to a repentant soul; and more—no doubt soon clear away the mist of trouble that dimmed the day of life. How alike,

these two sisters, strangely separated—Ora and Eola—in gentleness and faith!

She had work before her. She was not, like her father, giving to foolish superstitions—who could be, holding faith in Truth and Light?

The first task was to uproot this superstition; for, while it would ease the mind of the tortured man, it would also bring her nearer to Austin Burns.

With a determined will she set about the work, and knew not, until then, how admirable an actress she was. She would ridicule, then denounce, then strive by persuasive arguments, such as only woman can use, encouraged afresh with each effort, by marking a decidedly beneficial result.

As the days went by she applied herself with freshening ardor, and, at the same time, spoke of her mother—of her mother's nature, which, though she could remember nothing of its love, was one, she felt sure, to forgive, if not forget.

And Eola longed to see that mother. Would that some circumstance might bring them together was her constant thought.

Harnden Forde was changing. His eyes at times sparkled with their old light; his sunken cheeks were filling with flesh; the haggard look had almost disappeared, and a flush that had not tinged his face for many days now told of health and reviving strength.

The twentieth of February arrived.

It was a day Eola had anxiously looked forward to, for on this occasion she meant to use the picture of rejoicing people to demonstrate the pleasures of those who cast aside all care, and even forgot the absorbing mazes of business pursuits; and to the picture would be added her own voice to further the scheme of resuscitation.

Harnden Forde ate his breakfast that morning with a wholesome appetite, and smiling at the merry conversation of his watchful child.

"Such a glorious day, father!" she exclaimed, when they entered the parlor after the morning meal.

"Yes," he returned, quickly; "and we must not be idle. Come, hurry now, and get your things on. Remember this is the day of the Carnival!"

How like himself he seemed! With heart bounding and face glowing, she hastened to procure her habit, and in the mean time Forde had sent for a barouche.

Eola was inexpressibly happy as they were being driven away from their boarding house, which was near the east square of the capital.

She was happy in the result of her great exertions, for Harnden Forde, as he sat there beside his beautiful child, talked, acted—was like other men.

On they went, filled with eagerness for the sight that awaited them—a sight which had brought thousands from all parts of the United States; and as they whirled into the avenue and mingled with the gay throng of racing carriages, Forde's face soon betrayed how contagious was the general enthusiasm.

On up the avenue, commenting, laughing, and Eola's lovely features, twice lovely in the outline of joy, attracted the attention and admiring gaze of many.

Her deep-blue eyes vied with the soft azure of the skies; and, anon, a silvery laugh rung from her lips like the warble of a bird. Her long, rippling tresses, flowing in a cloudy mass about her shoulders, glistened in the sunlight like a golden mist.

On, bearking to the ring of jest and bursts of merriment; and then they turned about at Seventh street, to return upon the floor-like drive, for the races were about to commence.

At that instant Eola saw every trace of color recede from her father's face. A laugh was upon his lips, but it seemed frozen there.

The change in his demeanor was abrupt, startling.

She saw that he was trembling—that his eyes appeared fixed in their old store of terror, upon something on the north pavement of the avenue.

Filled with apprehension, she laid her hand upon his arm. He did not move.

"Father, what is it? What is the matter?"

No answer. Involuntarily her eyes followed his.

There she saw what had startled him. And it was not without a shuddering feeling she beheld the man for whom above all others she

cherished a bitter loathing, and whose clutches they had hoped to escape in going to Washington.

Yes, it was Harold Haxon, beyond the shadow of a doubt.

He saw them, and Eola fancied there was an expression of devilish triumph in the villain's face as he looked at them.

Forde seemed paralyzed; but Eola, with the quickness of thought, cried to the driver:

"Back! back to our house at once! Use your whip!"

Prompt to obey the order, the driver touched his horses with the whip, and the mettled steeds sprung forward.

Eola looked around. Harold Haxon had disappeared.

Away, away they went—the other vehicles about them seeming to stand still as they dashed past; away with the speed of wind, for she had again told the driver to use his whip.

At Four-and-a-half street she turned her head to look back. To her astonishment and horror, Haxon was on the pavement, nearly abreast of them. He had crossed over to the south side, where he could run with more freedom.

A sardonic smile played about the corners of his mouth and he raised his hat in a mocking bow.

Harnden Forde had not yet said a word. His lips were glued, and he trembled as with an ague.

Reaching the Capitol, they whirled around and sped up the north hill.

Eola saw her pursuer enter the west gate. His plan was easily divined. He would head them off.

"Now is my time!" she thought, aloud, and in the same breath the driver was ordered to turn his horses down New Jersey avenue.

The trick was successful.

Harold Haxon, in pursuit of his prey, was accompanied by Gil Bret.

"Come!" cried the former, as they reached the west gate. "Through here, and we've got them! Now tremble, Harnden Forde, for I am on your heels!"

"Go it, Haxy!" sputtered Bret, with difficulty, and they dashed forward along the north gravel-walk, to reach the eminence.

But they neglected to watch the movements of the pursued, thinking the game already in their own hands.

When they reached the top of the hill, the barouche, Forde, Eola—all had vanished.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A HARD RACE, A COLLISION AND A FIGHT.

CHRISTOPHER CREWLY seemed suddenly possessed of the idea that Harold Haxon stood in need of a thrashing; more, that he, Crewly, was the proper person to administer the same; and finally, judging from the abruptness of his movements, he was in a tremendous hurry to set about the task.

But, as he made a dash toward the villains, he saw something which caused him to halt, stare, open his mouth in astonishment.

The sight was Harnden Forde and Eola—the ones he and the others of his party were seeking.

For a moment he looked at them, and not until the barouche had turned around and was whirling away down the avenue, did he arouse from his momentary inaction.

As though melted into air, Haxon and Bret had disappeared. He knew that to search for them in the crowd would be tiresome and a mole-hunt, and as useless as a cry over a broken pitcher. Ideas appeared to possess his brain in abundance on that day, for another one struck him.

The fleeing pair had not yet reached Sixth street. Quick as a flash he recovered his hat, and sprung forward in pursuit.

Wat Blake, not comprehending the lawyer's second excitement—for he did not see the barouche and its occupants—stood for a few seconds gazing after his friend. When he turned around he was alone. His party were lost in the surging mass of people. The bent form of an aged woman moved toward the curbstone, and gazed down the street.

"Ah!" she muttered, in a whisper that was shrill despite its lowness; "there they go! There's Harnden Forde and Gil. They're after the barouche. Forde must have seen them, for he's going like mad! My old limbs can't do it, or I'd run, too. I'd like to see him—Forde. I'd tell him something that would

make him feel better, I would. But I can't run after him—no, I can't. I'm afraid I'll die before I can see him. But I can't help it—I can't," and with this she mingled with the crowd.

On, on went the barouche, and on, on went Crewly—his long legs carrying him over the ground at an amazing rate.

His hat was fixed tight on the back of his head, and the white umbrella rattled in his grasp.

Not for the smallest particle of a moment were his pale gray eyes removed from the object of his pursuit; not once did he notice the cries of tantalizing urchins who, thinking him one of the features of amusement for the day, greeted him as he sped past, with shouts and buzzes.

He ran just outside the curbstone, where the stretch was almost a clean one.

At Four-and-a-half street, a policeman saw him coming, and extended his arms, shouting: "Hold on, there! Get back into line—hear?"

Crewly frowned; he raised his umbrella, doubled his fist, and cried:

"Stand a-s-i-d-e! Knock you down if you get in the road! Take care—hal! Now then!—so!" like a shot, with a Herculean bound, a sidelong leap that seemed to twist him in a ball, he evaded the officer and continued on, on like a race-horse.

The act was applauded with a faint cheer. On any other occasion, he would have had the impudence to stop, bow, and compliment the policeman on his efficiency. But now he was deaf.

At Second street, a boy who saw him coming, immediately set his brain to work for a plan to get up a laugh.

When Crewly drew near, there was a reception ready for him.

His eyes were riveted upon the fleeing barouche, his whole attention engrossed with the pursuit; he saw nothing, heard nothing.

Suddenly something dark was hurled out beyond the curb, and tangled itself between Crewly's legs. The lawyer stumbled, kicked vigorously; there was an unearthly howl, a snarl, a snap, a whine of agony, and a frightened terrier, with ribs aching, started full run up the avenue—his fright and speed augmented by a shower of stones and loud cries.

"Hang it!" muttered he, not delayed even by this occurrence; "hope that boy'll get his nose cracked before he goes home to-night!"

On, still on went the barouche, and like a hound on the scent of game followed the determined lawyer.

He was possessed of good wind; but it soon became a trying vexation to keep up his straining gait. His face was red, the perspiration stood out upon his forehead, he panted for breath.

"There they go! Hang it!—wish they'd stop"—as the barouche turned to ascend the north hill.

When he reached the railroad, he saw them half-way to the top.

"Lord!" he ejaculated, with an effort; "what a run! What a hill! But I've almost got 'em. Get 'em presently."

Up, up—presently the vehicle made another turn and dashed away more furiously than ever down New Jersey avenue.

Crewly was becoming disgusted with the chase, which, he feared, was to prove a longer one than he counted on.

"Hang it! Why don't they reach the end of the route?"

He had reached the narrow plank-way that served for a pavement, and arrived at the temporary steps, when two men confronted him—Harold Haxon and Gil Bret.

Taken aback by their unlooked-for presence, he stopped in his headlong course and gazed at them in astonishment.

They, too, were breathing hard in the severe tax of physical power they had undergone. For a second, they eyed the lawyer in silence; Crewly returned the stare with interest.

Gil Bret was the first to speak. A frown added to the ugliness of his ill-cut features, and, clinching his fist, he stepped toward their mutual enemy.

"Look out!" gasped Crewly, fully out of breath. "Take care—vagabond! Bad business! Hit you once, knock you in half! Dangerous, I am! Frightful! Fight like the devil when I try! Keep off!" and the white umbrella was poised threateningly aloft.

Gil Bret did not notice either the warning or the upraised umbrella.

He saw, in the man before him, an enemy; and Harold Haxon glared upon him with intensest hatred.

"Look out now, I tell you," snapped Crewly, for the second time. "Dangerous! Don't fool with me! Get hurt!—hal!—rascal!"

With a sudden spring, Bret closed upon the lawyer. His ponderous fist circled in the air, then descended with lightning quickness—upon an umbrella which met it half-way.

There was an excruciating crack of knuckles, and Crewly muttered:

"Told you so!—dog!"

Maddened by the lawyer's coolness, Gil Bret followed up this blow with another, more successful, and, in return, his head was made to ring and ache by the dull thud of the white umbrella as it struck fairly on his temple.

A fierce oath, half-howl of rage, burst from the bruiser's lips, and he clinched with his adversary.

Then the entire suppleness, strength and steel-like elasticity of the lawyer's body was displayed.

As they struggled for the mastery, Crewly would seem to twist and coil about his antagonist, then unwind, then wriggle and squirm into a fresh hold—all the while availing himself of opportunities to put in a blow with his hard, bony fist. Already the bruiser's face was covered with blood.

Round and round they twisted, swayed, bent, staggered. Gil Bret was now cool, but savage in that coolness. The cleverness with which Crewly avoided every blow and defeated every trick within the wrestler's art, was tantalizing.

Presently both tripped. Down to the ground, rolling several feet, pitched, tugged and fought the two men. Bret on top. With an adroit movement, Crewly slipped, eel-like, from the other's hold, and turned the tables. He was now uppermost, and held Bret down as if between a vice.

"Now, dog!—where are we now, eh? How's that for a fight?"

In the excitement of the moment, he forgot the presence of a third party.

Bareheaded, his comical countenance now flushed and stern with triumph, he looked down upon the whipped bruiser and raised his fist.

"Now, scoundrel!—you'll remember Chris. Crewly—Ha!" Some one grasped his wrist, and a voice said:

"Hold!"

Turning, he beheld Harold Haxon, who held his wrist in a grip of iron and pointed a revolver at his heart.

The muzzle of the deadly weapon covered him beyond a possibility of escape, and the villain added, hissing:

"Now then, my fine fellow, whoever you are, we'll put an end to your meddlesome life!"

His finger was upon the trigger. Crewly said nothing. With the face of a Stoic, he awaited the fatal explosion.

"Shoot 'im, Haxy!" sputtered Bret, enraged at his defeat; "shoot 'im quick, an' let me up!"

The shot did not come. A sound of footsteps, a thud; Harold Haxon staggered against the railing and the pistol fell from his hand.

The new comer was Austin Burns.

Crewly leaped up, and Bret no sooner felt himself free, than he gained his feet and dashed off on a run.

In a vain attempt to catch the bruiser, Haxon was forgotten, and both villains made their escape.

While Crewly examined his umbrella, he said, snappishly:

"There—hang it! you've spoilt it all."

"Spoiled what?" exclaimed Austin, as he picked up the revolver and put it in his pocket.

"What? Why, my little game. I had 'em! See? There you've kicked up a rumpus that's let 'em get away. Bad business, this! Too bad! I'm sorry."

"But Mr. Crewly, your life was—"

"Never mind; all right. Where did you come from? Thought you were sick in bed."

"Not confined to my bed, Mr. Crewly; only a little indisposed—"

"Nervous system out of order—abem! Take care of yourself."

"The day appeared so glorious and enticing, that I could not content myself in the house. I walked out to breathe the delicious air. I believe Providence must have guided my steps to this place. If I had not arrived

Just when I did, I fear an intimate friend of mine would have been killed."

"Hang it!" exclaimed Crewly, suddenly remembering what had brought him there; "I've had my run for nothing—except to nearly demolish a scoundrel!"

"What run?"

The lawyer briefly explained. While speaking, he gazed up New Jersey avenue, and afar off, in the neighborhood of "H" street, he saw the barouche.

"You have seen Eola, then?" cried Austin, eagerly.

"Yes," bluntly; "but it don't amount to stale beer—ahem! excuse me. She's evaporated. Gone. Lost again. See? Come, I'm going home. Had enough Carnival for this morning, I have. Wonder where Wat Blake is? I'm nearly dead—tired out. Hungry, too! Ever get hungry, Burns? Yes? My sympathy, sir. Guess it's most dinner-time. Come along."

The rooms of the pursuers and pursued were not a stone's throw apart, yet neither knew the proximity of the other.

Fate, oftentimes, keeps us separated from an object by merest tissues.

CHAPTER XXV.

"JUST THE PARTIES I WANTED!"

EOLA breathed more freely when, after passing the depot, she turned and looked back to see if she had baffled her pursuer.

Haxon was not to be seen, and she drew a long sigh as she ordered the driver to slacken his speed. Then she said to her father:

"We have escaped him."

But Forde was silent. His eyes, now dull and staring, like they had been on the night of Austin's dismissal, were fixed vacantly on the floor of the barouche; and his face was of a livid paleness that filled her with alarm.

"Father, father, I say we have escaped them—him. He is no longer near us. Look up; look at me."

Slowly he raised his head; the icy features told of pain and mental suffering.

Had all the long weeks of straining nerve and taxing brain, which had been Eola's, gone for naught? Was all the good she had done, to be thus dashed down and give place to the sinking spirits which had nigh reduced Harnden Forde to a tottering skeleton?

"Father!" she cried, hurriedly taking his cold, chill hands in her own; "oh! don't—don't let this so unnerve you. Fight off the terrible feeling. The danger is past."

"Past, my child!"—the tone was bitter and painful—"Did you say 'past'? Yes—yes—maybe it is—but, for how long? God! how long! It is but a short respite. We are discovered, hunted down; Harold Haxon has traced us here; and now—Heaven pity me!—what next?"

"Nothing!" she said, firmly; "nothing next. Father, look at me—I am only a frail girl; but, oh! if you had the courage that—that I have, you would not let this wicked man so terrify you! I do not fear him. Can you not be strong as I am? Father!"—and the ripe lips molded themselves into stern shape as she added, with force: "be a man."

Harnden Forde started at this rebuke. A faint red spot appeared upon his either cheek. The words of the lovely girl struck home.

Be a man! Who, thus addressed, when cringing in weakness before the threats of an enemy, would not rouse to honor and defense? In her speech, Eola had accomplished wonders—as woman ever will, when her heart is on her lips, and her voice a spur to action.

Harnden Forde pressed the little hands that were clasped in his, and while his eyes sparkled for a moment, he said:

"Eola, I am a man!"

The quick start, the half-suppressed exclamation on Eola's part told what gladness his words caused her.

They had reached "H" street and the barouche was turned to the left, proceeding along to Massachusetts avenue; then, at Eola's order, they were driven down Third street.

Her intention was to reach the south hill of the capital. She hoped by the maneuver to reach their home in safety, and without being watched.

They had almost reached the avenue, when the horses were abruptly checked by a quick, sharp command from Eola, and—admirable girl!—she called her father's attention to the

brilliant draperies and festooned colors about them.

Harold Haxon and Gil Bret, returning rather crestfallen from the scene of their late defeat, were at that moment crossing the street at the corner.

Bret's face was smeared and dirty. His general appearance formed a striking contrast to the fashionable figure of his companion. He was now followed, though he knew it not, by the woman who had acted so mysteriously a short time before at Seventh street.

The quick eyes of the girl saw them in time to prevent discovery; and though she did not know Gil Bret, she saw that he was a ruffian, an associate of Haxon's, and consequently her enemy.

Luckily, the two men did not turn their gaze up the street, nor dream how close their prey was to them. They soon passed on, mingling in the dense crowd.

After this, another and easier route was pursued homeward.

Once alone in their rooms, Harnden Forde sunk down upon a sofa and buried his face in his hands.

Notwithstanding his words which had so gladdened Eola's heart, he could not shake off the creeping sensations created by sight of his dreaded enemy, so close, and, he knew, so merciless.

Then he thought of the paper which Haxon held over him, which could expose him to public contempt and the law—a blow that, with all his child's soothing and sustaining love, would completely break him down in the inevitable shame that threatened.

When she had laid aside her things, she went to him and reposed her golden tresses on his breast. He started, looked down upon the fair head, his heart throbbing with strong emotion.

"Eola—my little pet!" he said, in a low, tremulous voice, while tears glistened in his eyes, "I am leading you a most unhappy life."

"No, dear father"—in a quiet whisper—"I am not so very unhappy after all. You love me a great deal, do you not?"

"Love you, my dear, fond child!" he moaned. "Oh, God!—bow much! You are all I have on earth. You are the only one who cares for Harnden Forde now; how can I thank Heaven enough, that, in this great misery, I have one like you to speak of love, to cheer, to give me courage? Eola—God bless you, my child!" he caressed the trusting form that clung to him, loving and confiding.

Eola said nothing. She could not trust her voice then, for the carmine lips were quivering and the blue eyes moistened as strange, mastering feelings welled within her beaving bosom.

Presently she murmured, softly:

"Then, father, if you will always love me, I cannot be unhappy. But—but—"

"What is it?"

"I do wish I could persuade you entirely from your fear of this man, Haxon! Believe me, he cannot do you all the injury he threatens; there is a whisper that tells me he cannot do you any great harm—and you know, father, when a woman speaks her thoughts upon the prompting of that instinct which seems her especial gift, it is seldom she is wrong. We are not like men, who reach conclusions by long arguments and delaying reveries; our perception is quickened by a mysterious prompting within, and when we speak, though the impression be one of the instant, it is almost always right. And I tell you, father—I know not why nor how it is—something says to me, 'Do not fear Harold Haxon!' Now, won't you be yourself once more?"

Long, earnestly he gazed into the bright eyes that were upturned to his; then he imprinted a kiss upon her brow.

"I will try, Eola, dear child; I will try!"

The day marched on. Faintly to the ears of father and child, as they sat alone in their luxurious apartments, came the murmur of the distant Festival; but it had, for the time, lost its attractions for them.

The races were over; again the avenue swarmed with carriages and human beings. With every passing hour, the excitement grew more intense.

Old men forgot their years; ladies forgot the cold reserve and icy mien which "society" had chiseled in their lives, and many an act, though harmless, that would have ex-

cited remark at other times, marked their indulgence in the gay pleasures of the day.

Time flew on; night was fast approaching.

The miles of lanterns that lined the avenue on either side, from the Treasury to the Capitol, were being lighted, and brilliant illuminations began to dart innumerable rays upon the wooden drive.

Soon it was dark—dark! Then fairy-land must have known naught but chaos, for the City of Jewels—made famous by the immortal harp of poesy—itself was vied in the blazing that flashed on every side.

At intervals, the calciums shot forth their day-like glare; the gas-lamps with their additional burners, hissed their flame in quivering jets; trees, in their dress of Chinese lanterns, seemed alive with fluttering sparks; not a house but glowed in the scintillation of its sparkling ornaments.

It was a sight to dim the oft-praised Lanthorn Feast of the Orient; and, like a living sea, the broad street thronged with thousands.

Still, there was no cry of "Ecco moccoli! Ecco m'ecoli!" (Here are lights!) for there was not that packing the carriages, with merry occupants holding burning candles and tapers—each one striving to extinguish that of his neighbor, and when successful, crying, loudly: "Lenza moccoli! Lenza moccoli!" (Without a light!)

The gayest scene in the Roman Carnival is the *Moccoletti*; and this feature did seem neglected.

But the deficiency was well made up. Toward the Treasury building flowed the vast concourse of people to witness the pyrotechnic display.

Rockets hissed through the air; bombs hurtled and exploded with terrific force; Bengal fires lit up the southern portico, discovering a picture long to be remembered; fusilades, wheels, crosses, signs, national devices—all were flaming, flashing, burning, spitting, smoking, illuminating the night in weird and fascinating colors; while loud acclamations of delight burst from the assembled host.

Harold Haxon and Gil Bret were lookers-on.

Their prey had escaped them for the day, and they passed the evening like thousands of others who surged, swayed, billowed around them, like the waves of the ocean.

Suddenly, an opening was made in the crowd. A barouche was approaching from the gate, to extricate itself from the throng.

Gil Bret saw it advance slowly between the living walls, and the moment he did so, he grasped his companion's arm.

"Look, Haxy!—by thunder! There's your gal. See!"

Haxon turned quickly.

A young girl was standing up in the barouche, and she did, indeed, resemble Eola.

Haxon made a movement to follow, elbowing his way forward. Bret kept close at his heels.

"That's her, Haxy, an' no mistake! Go for 'er!"

He had scarce spoken, when a tall, spare form squirmed in between them; a hand was laid upon the shoulders of each.

"Just the parties I wanted!" exclaimed a familiar voice.

Christopher Crewly held both in an iron grip.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SHADOW FOLLOWS SHADOWS.

THE sudden apparition of the lawyer, who seemed to rise from out the ground, and who was ever getting in the road of the villains when they least expected, and strongest hoped not to see him—his ghost-like appearance there between them; the manner in which he laid hold of them; the significant emphasis of his speech, as he looked into the face of first one and then the other, apparently enjoying their astonishment; all rendered their surprise great, the expression of their countenances one of fear.

Haxon's first thought was of arrest. He had drawn a pistol on the lawyer, threatened his life; to this, Crewly had a witness in the fourth party who had arrived so opportunely upon the scene at the Capitol. The act was punishable by law, and, if arrested, charged with an attempt upon another's life, the result would be incarceration, if not attended with more serious end.

He was speechless, somewhat terrified, could but glare upon the one who held him, and that glare, despite his situation, was one of hatred and desperate defiance.

Gil Bret just glanced into the lawyer's face, and exclaimed, with a grunt:

"Well, by thunder!"

Whether it was disgust, bewilderment or amazement at the way in which those bony fingers grasped, and seemed to sink into the flesh of his shoulder; or whether it was all these combined in a feeling of helplessness, as he halted in that retaining grip of iron, it is impossible to say; but the words he uttered were all that could express the sensation he experienced, whatever that sensation was.

"Just the parties I wanted!" repeated the lawyer, eying them alternately.

"An' what do you want us for?" spoke Bret, with a scowl.

"Release me!" demanded Haxon, in a voice thickened by rage and pain, for the hold on his shoulder grip'd harder each second.

"Softly. A bird in the hand is worth two in a bush—as I've two birds in hand, I'm not bothered about the bush. Explanatory! What do you think of yourselves, eh? Rascals, both!"

Their dialogue, very naturally, was attracting attention. Haxon assumed a little brass.

"What is the meaning of this insult, scoundrel? Take your hands off!"

Crewly was, for a moment, taken aback by this speech. But he soon saw through it. He also saw that, in that densely-packed mass of human beings, a number of faces were staring in wonder. Lowering his voice, he said:

"Yes—I see. 'Twon't dol' Pretty smart, that. Rather brassy—very. My name's Crewly. I'm a lawyer. Sometimes I fight a little"—significantly. "If you don't come with me docilely, I'll give you another lamming, in about a pair of minutes. And I always keep my word—more so with a rascal than anybody else. Hear? Now then march; turn round; come—sharp!"

"What you goin' to do?" put Bret, without budging.

"Ahem! none of your business. Just—"

"None o' your tricks 'ith me!" snarled the bruiser, not so much cowed, after all, by vivid recollections of his late thrashing. "I ain't the man 'at's a-goin' to be bossed by you nor any other carpet-baggin' jackass—mind! Now, you just take your hand off my shoulder."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Crewly; then he ground out, between his teeth:

"Take care now. Hit you once, knock you in three pieces, this time, sure. Spatter your nose all over your face—I will. Earnest, I am. No fooling. Centra' Guard-house. I arrest you—"

"You do, eh?" Gil Bret's head was lowered, his dull, muddy eyes seemed, for the moment, ablaze; he looked at the lawyer from under half-closed lids.

That the bruiser could hit a stout blow with his fist, must be inferred, else he would not have acquired the appellation we give him. Though the lawyer had outmatched him in a fair fight, his bull-dog courage was not gone, by any means, nor would he have hesitated to give his enemy another "shake," had opportunity offered.

Hence, when Crewly stated that their destination was to be the Central Guard-house, he very promptly determined within himself that he would submit to nothing of the kind.

Harold Haxon saw his companion's fist slowly doubling, saw that Bret was about to do something toward their escape, and he, also, aroused to the emergency of the case.

Slowly his own fist began to double, and his eyes fixed upon the lawyer with a savage gleam.

When Bret struck, he would strike, too; the simultaneous resistance was certain to prove effectual, and their escape be insured.

"You're arrested, I say. Understand that?" said Crewly, immediately.

"An' who's a-goin' to take us?" Bret asked, sneeringly.

"Who? Well!—more impudence than I've seen in a month, this is. Who? Why, me, me, me. Hear?—me. Come on now; march!"

Two fists were tightly clinched; two pairs of eyes glowered upon him.

"Hear me? Come on. Won't Well, now—" some one hit Crewly a smart blow on the back, and some one cried in his ear:

"Look! Look, Crewly! there's Eola! Quick!"

It was Austin Burns. Blake, Crewly and Burns were there together, to witness the display of fireworks, and the lawyer was close by his two companions when he halted Haxon and Bret, though they did not observe his movement.

The tone was so sharp, the cry so sudden, the mouth so close to his ear, that Crewly winced, and his hold on his captives loosened.

The young man had, unknowing, done his bitterest enemies a favor.

No sooner was the grip on their shoulders withdrawn, than, like eels, quick as a flash, the villains slipped away in the crowd.

Perhaps it was better for Crewly that matters were so; else, in another instant, two hard fists, stod with hate, directed in desperation, would have blinded him and knocked him senseless.

He was not venturesome by nature; thought

that, after thrashing one, in the forenoon, and seeing the pistol of the other, they would yield to him. He knew not the impending calamity to himself, and the escape of his captives threw him into considerable ill humor.

"Hang it!" he exclaimed, turning upon Austin, with a frown; "there you go again! Every time I catch those rascals, you let 'em off. Bad business, sir. Want of co-operation. You'll have to let me alone in future or—I'll get mad! Now then, what's the matter? What made you squeak in my ear, eh?"

"It was Eola, Mr. Crewly—" began the young man, who may be pardoned what he had done, considering the excitement occasioned in him by a supposed vision of his betrothed. But Crewly interrupted him with a snap:

"Eola? What was Eola? Where?"

"In the barouche. Didn't you see her?"

"See her?—no. What barouche? Saw her in a barouche this morning; nearly run my legs off, too, trying to catch her. No go, though—"

"But, Mr. Crewly, she passed right by us—through this crowd. I saw her; you must have seen her."

"Tell you I didn't. Here—you'd better go home. Night air don't agree with wounded men. Your head's turned. Eola Forde go through this crowd!—in a barouche?—you saw her? Nonsense! Come on now; where's Wat Blake?"

"Gone after the barouche; after Eola," replied Austin, who felt this would convince his friend he was not dreaming.

Crewly had started to move away. He stopped short; the look he fixed upon the young man was comical in the extreme, and he enunciated the one word:

"No!"

"But I tell you yes," Austin said, firmly. "Why do you doubt me? I tell you I saw Eola. Wat Blake saw her; he has gone in pursuit."

"Find it a long one then, I guess." He sniffed and chuckled as he thought of Wat Blake taking the useless, fatiguing run he had in the morning.

"Don't you think he can follow them?"

"Hope he may," returned the lawyer, illogically. "Come on now; the fun's over; and I've lost those rascals for a second time. Hang it! it's all your fault."

Austin was not disposed to encourage Crewly's ill-bumor by retort.

The exhibition of fireworks was over; the concourse of people were moving away from the scene of their enjoyment.

Songs, jests, laughter, shouts filled the air. Pretty misses on the arms of affectionate lovers, were chatting merrily, and praising with warmth all they had seen.

Vehicles were striving in vain to go forward; people elbowed, jimmied, forced themselves upon those in their front and rear, endeavoring to make a clear way; and as they moved down the avenue, it was like the immense waves of a ruffled sea.

Crewly and his young friend hurried forward through every little opening that offered a chance of escape.

When they could walk abreast, Austin Burns said, in a voice that betrayed the eagerness of hope:

"Oh! I do wish that Blake may succeed in tracing her out!"

"Her? Oh, yes; excuse me; I had forgot. So do I," the latter, with peculiar emphasis.

"Your words imply that it is impossible," said the young man, interrogatively.

"Do they?" "Oh, no. But you see, fact is—"

"Well, what, Mr. Crewly?"

"Why, only this: if he has to run like I did, this morning, he'll not be likely to catch 'em. Ahem! not very. Give it up as a bad job. That's all."

"Did you chase them far this morning?"

"Did I?" dryly. "Rather! Straight mile—full split. Then up a hill; then had a fight; nearly got my brains blown out. Umph! Enjoyable, that is, or was!"

"But they must be somewhere inside the city limits."

"Then they take pains to reach home by driving clear round the outskirts. Tell you, you might as well chase a shooting-star! Fact. I do believe they saw me, though."

"But, Mr. Crewly, we must continue the search, even if it should lead us all the way around the globe! We must find them."

"Exactly. But if it's going to be a stern-chase, and we've got to follow around that globe on a full run, you'll excuse me if I give out about the time we've made a couple of miles. If I was steel-planked, and carried a steam apparatus to move my legs, and a bellows to keep—but what's the use in talking about it? Ahem! I'm afraid it's a bad business. We're going to have a long chase and a strong chase, and a chase that'll make us ache, before we book what we're after."

As they passed the Reservation, opposite the theater, they did not notice the forms of two men standing in the shadow of a poster-board, and who exchanged a few hurried words as our friends passed them.

Christopher Crewly and Austin Burns went on, unconscious of the two figures that were following them.

Had we glanced into the faces of those who walked in the rear, we would have seen features distorted with malignant hate, and the black, fierce, threatening expression of murderous resolve.

And there was still another figure, who followed, with equally cautious movements, those who were dogging the steps of Crewly and Burns.

CHAPTER XXVII.

FOUND!

WAT BLAKE had started in pursuit of the barouche in which, he felt sure, he had seen Eola.

The lawyer had acquainted him with the occurrence of the forenoon, and as he made his way with difficulty through the crowd, he resolved to make the chase as short as possible—he would head them off at the first opportunity.

The pursued parties seemed unaware of his movements, for they proceeded along at leisure speed, and Blake gained upon them rapidly.

Into and along "D" street they led him; past the Reservation; up Thirteenth, then down "F."

As he passed Sheldon's dancing academy, he was met by a small party of revelers, who were going home, and somewhat under the influence of liquor. For a moment his attention was attracted from the object of his pursuit—only for a moment, but when the party had passed him, and he looked up again, the barouche had vanished.

His heart gave a bound; he ran quickly to the corner—looked up, down, east, west. Not a sign.

The streets were deserted and gloomy; not one solitary figure, or an echoing footstep.

"Too bad!" he exclaimed, disappointedly. "Crewly said it was like chasing a locomotive. They have disappeared altogether. Too bad!"

He fancied he heard the rumbling of wheels on the soft, earthy street; but even this ceased immediately, and he turned homeward, thoroughly discouraged.

"Strange," he thought: "how they elude us! This does not promise well for our object. Bertha must not know of this second vain pursuit; it will cause her to despair. I regret that Crewly mentioned his chase of this morning. And Haxon, with his vile ally, is in town, eh? Poor Eola! I fear for her. But then, Providence surely will not permit a match between two so unfitted for each other! Our case is in the hands of the Omnipotent; if he designs our success or failure in this pursuit, either is for the best. But it will go hard with Bertha, if that villain should wed her child."

The hour was late. Wat Blake quickened his pace, glancing about him occasionally, as if expecting to see again those who had slipped away from him, and alternately framing his thoughts upon their situation, which promised nothing.

When he reached the east square of the Capitol, he slackened his walk. He pondered deeply, surmising and considering upon all feasible plans or means which might aid him in discovering the whereabouts of those he sought.

While in the midst of these reveries, the rattle and grind of wheels, on the cobblestones before Whitney's Hotel struck upon his ear.

All vehicles, of whatsoever kind, had an interest for him, just then; the sound of one approaching, naturally enough, drew his attention. It was a barouche—ah! Blake smothered an exclamation which rose to his lips; his heart throbbed, his face flushed with the fever of a fresh excitement.

As they passed swiftly by the gas-lamp, at the corner, he had seen a familiar face—two of them. It was Harden Forde and Eola!

This time there was no mistake. They were close enough for him to hear Eola speak.

"We certainly have not been disappointed in the promised sights, father—" came to his ears; and he heard no more.

Like a shadow, silent and swift, glided Wat Blake after them.

Had they far to go? Would this chase too prove fruitless? Was he to have another run for nothing? These questions he asked himself, and almost held his breath in suspense, as the vehicle whirled to the right around the northeast corner of the square. Then it turned to the left and held up, until the horses only walked.

"I have them!" he exclaimed; "they live near!"

Half the block was gone over; then it paused before a fine, large house.

Wat Blake stepped behind a tree and watched.

Forde and Eola alighted; they entered the house. The barouche drove off; silence reigned. The retreat of the pursued pair was discovered.

"Found!" burst from his lips; and he hurried away toward his own boarding-house.

"Found at last! Not a moment is to be lost! We shall see Harden Forde at once—to-night! Bertha shall see him, and give him opportunity."

to repair the ill he has done. Oh! Heaven give us ability to convince him how ridiculous is that accursed superstition of his! and all may yet be well; the Black Crescent will be restored! The letters which Bertha holds, the dying confession of Louise Ternor—these must show him his folly, when it is explained! And who has he to thank for the leniency I propose?—a dark frown settling on his brow—“who has turned me from my vow to make him repent in shame, his wickedness? Ora!—dear girl that she is! How she has pleaded for him! How she has beseeched us to forgive! Who could deny her wish? Who refuse concession to her argument? So pure—so gentle—yes, she is all that saves you from fearful punishment at my hands, Harnden Forde. She, your own child, whose life your weak nature had so blighted, pleads for you, saves you from the dishonor of publicity of your acts!”

He walked faster. His boarding-house, as before stated, was scarce a stone's throw from the rooms occupied by Harnden Forde and his child.

Christopher Crewly and his young friend Burns, proceeded straight homeward.

Once, and once only, did the object of the two mysterious shadows who followed them become apparent. It was while they walked around the square and had almost reached their boarding-house.

As they pursued their way outside the railings, the two figures entered the gate, ran in a direction right oblique, came out on the south of the square, concealed themselves behind two of the trees that lined the curb, their forms blending in the surrounding gloom.

Unconscious of danger, Crewly and Burns continued briskly on.

A glittering knife-blade flashed in the darkness; a stout arm raised in the air as they drew nigh. The would-be assassin gathered his energies for a sudden spring, concentrated all his strength in the arm that was to deal the death-blow.

Murder was imminent. The intended victims drew nearer.

Suddenly the footsteps of another comer sounded upon the still air, and a muffled figure came up. Crewly recognized him.

“Hello, Wat Blake!”

“Is that you, Mr. Crewly?”

“That's me. Yours forever—much. What's the row, eh? Where are you going now?”

“I was looking for you—”

“Did you follow them?” interrupted Austin, quickly, his whole mind upon Eola.

“Yes—and lost them.”

The young man groaned.

“Certainly—lost 'em!” exclaimed Crewly, treating the intelligence as a matter of course, and looking at Austin in a way that plainly meant, “Told you so!”

“But I was fortunate enough to find them again.”

“Eh! Found 'em again?” Crewly contemplated him with a sharp gaze.

“You found them again!” cried Austin, hope revived in his breast. “Quick!—tell me! Where—where are they, Blake?”

“Yes—where are they? I'd like to know,” added Crewly.

“I lost the barouche that I chased at Tenth and “F” streets. Giving up, I then came home, and had almost reached the house, when fate brought them right before my eyes—”

“Good! Fate!” put in the lawyer.

“They live within a square of our boarding-house.”

Both listeners started.

“Don't say!” exclaimed Crewly, in huge surprise.

Austin Burns was being consumed with impatience.

“Go on, Blake! What else?” he cried. “Where do they live? Take us there.”

“I was walking up and down here, waiting for you,” continued Blake. “I thought, perhaps, you'd come in a car. We'll now go to them, at once.”

“Oh, Eola! Eola!—found at last!” uttered the young man, as they started off. “Hurry, please—you do not walk fast; you keep me in suspense, purposely. Come, come!”

“Now, young man, keep cool,” advised Crewly, who, with hat, as usual, on the back of his head, sleeves pushed up, and legs moving at an amazing rate, was, himself, the picture of excitement, and the last one to set an example of coolness, under the circumstances. “I say, keep cool. Hear? Bad business—this getting excited. Look at me—come on, Wat Blake. I am perfectly calm—never felt more indifferent in all my life—hurry, Blake! If you allow your nerves to get unstrung, it'll hurt your wound. Fact. I never permit excitement to sway my actions. Be like me, sir—see! Perfectly—Wat Blake, come on! Now, if—Hey? Why, they don't live here?”

Blake had paused before their boarding-house. He was ascending the steps.

“Blake, you surely cannot mean that they are in the same house with us?” cried Austin.

“No,” was the reply. “I have stopped for

Bertha and Ora. I saw them before I saw you. They are waiting. They would go with us.”

“Hurry—hurry, then,” said the young man, impatiently. “Every moment is an hour. It is a trial to count the seconds that I am separated from Eola.”

“Yes,” spoke Crewly, “separation's reduced to seconds. Must say I'm a little impatient myself. Want to see Harnden Forde considerably much—I do. That laudanum affair, you know. So—he's gone!”

Blake disappeared within the house. He was absent from them probably ten minutes, but those minutes were to Austin like ages.

When Wat Blake returned he was accompanied by Bertha Forde and Ora. The former's face was pale and stern, her mien markedly reserved. She was about to confront the man who had caused her every suffering in life, through his weak, superstitious nature—who had spurned her when she offered to forgive.

Would she forgive him now? Had Ora's pleadings accomplished their object? Would the man go unpunished who had made the whole of her (Ora's) past life a horrid dream to look back upon?

Neither mother nor daughter spoke. Their minds were busy, and yet it would be hard to tell the exact thoughts of each. The whole party were silent, as if by mutual understanding.

Christopher Crewly and Austin Burns—or, at least, one of the two—had been miraculously delivered from the fatal knife-blow, by the unexpected appearance of Wat Blake.

As the three moved away, the shining knife was returned to its sheath, and a voice muttered, savagely:

“Curse—the—luck!”

The voice was Gil Bret's.

The accompanying shadow was Harold Haxon. The last-named villain glided out from behind a tree, and exclaimed, in half-smothered anger:

“By the fiends, Gil Bret, I swear it would seem that Satan has turned against us!”

“That 'ere's just it!” returned the bruiser, in a guttural, growling tone, and he gazed after the fast-disappearing forms of the three men.

“But you heard, didn't you?” said, and asked, Haxon.

“Heard?”

“Yes—they've found out where Forde lives! I heard that Burns mention Eola's name.”

“That 'ere's a fact. So 'e did.”

The bruiser suddenly recollected.

“What is to binder our becoming as wise as they are?”

“How?”

“How! Didn't you hear that man—you say his name is Blake—tell the others they'd go to Forde's house at once?”

“O-h! So—'e—did.”

“There's going to be a row there, you may wager.”

“An' I'd like to see that 'ere row, Haxy.” Bret saw through the other's meaning.

“When Forde drives them from him—as he will do—then we'll step in. Eh?”

“Jes' so!”

They followed the trio, skulking in the shadows of the railing, and keeping a sharp lookout, lest they should lose sight of those whose footsteps they dogged.

They soon made another discovery—saw where our friends lived—saw the party of five leave the house and proceed northward.

Soon Blake paused before the house into which he had seen Harnden Forde and Eola enter. He gave the bell a loud pull. Then an ominous silence prevailed.

There was another watcher, another witness to the movements of all—the mysterious old woman who had made her appearance in the morning, near Seventh street.

It was she who followed the two villains all the way from Thirteenth street.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHERE IS THE BLACK CRESCENT?

HARNDEN FORDE and his child occupied apartments on the first floor—two bed-rooms and a parlor, *en suite*.

They had not retired yet—sat in their parlor, amid the rich tapestries and other furniture of costly elegance.

Forde was again in his silent, thoughtful mood. Eola sat beside him, her head pillow'd on his shoulder, and she spoke to him in tones whose gentleness persuaded off the humor of abstraction that would fasten upon him.

They had just returned from the revelries and brilliant show that enlivened Pennsylvania avenue. The drive in the evening was of her doing, for she had determined that no feature of the Carnival—particularly the sublime picture of the illumination—should be lost upon her father.

“Are you not pleased with what you have seen?” she asked, looking up into his face, as if in wonder that he could be so indifferent to the great display they had witnessed.

“Yes,” he replied, “I am pleased, Eola—very

much. It is 'most enough to make one forget trouble.”

“Then let it be so! Oh, let it be so, father! Forget your troubles. You are wearing yourself away, in mind and body, and it is to no purpose. Why, even if you had anything to fear from Harold Haxon—and I feel, I feel that you have not—even then, what good to be brooding over a situation so unpleasant, when it will not better the aspect of things!”

How quick she was to catch upon his words! And it was always so, since their arrival in Washington. The merest point was dear to her, and she never failed to use her utmost argument.

Forde was silent for a moment; presently his eyes turned to those of his child, and a faint smile wreathed about his mouth.

“My little pet, how you do strive to give me courage! I see through your kind, loving intent; but there is one thing—you forget that there is other danger than that which threatens through Harold Haxon. My wronged wife, your mother, poor, ill-treated Bertha, would punish me for my past wickedness. And I deserve it—yes, I deserve it!” the latter part of his speech in a voice tremulous with emotion.

“Oh, no, father! I am sure mother will forgive you—for my sake—”

“I fear, I know not.”

“How do you know? You are too fast. I cannot think that the one who gave me birth, to whom I owe my heart—which is ever ready to forgive those who would wrong me, if they desist and strive to make amends—I cannot think that such a one, who gave me to the world as I am, can be so different from me and deny you what her own child would grant to any—”

“Nay, nay, Eola; wait. You promise too much. I know your heart is in your task, but, think—such wrongs as I have done your mother are not so easily forgiven, if at all. God! I wonder that even you will call me ‘father,’ or forgive, after learning what you have!”

He was weeping. Not sobbing, but that silent gush of tears which wells from the deepest fountain of the soul, and speaks, far more, of utter sadness.

His voice was husky; his vision was dim, uncertain.

“Would you like to see her now—mother?” Eola inquired, hesitatingly.

“Yes,” he answered, though the monosyllable was uttered chokingly. “Yes, I would like to see her. I would plead, beg, beseech for forgiveness. Would she grant it?” The question was put more to himself.

“Yes, father, I am sure she would grant it. She could not look upon you, see how you repented, see how, with anxiety and fear, you had wasted away, until—oh! father”—and her words were broken by sobs that would burst from her lips—“you are not what you were once! So proud, so erect, noble to look upon; and now—now—” She could not speak further; her lips trembled, her tongue would not obey.

Harnden Forde, with nervous hand, tenderly smoothed the golden wealth of hair back from the white brow of his child. It was a picture.

Then, in the stillness of deepening night, with no sound stirring the passive air, save the soft murmur of their voices; the bright rays of the chandelier haloing a lovely, ministering angel in the form and garb of mortal, who soothed, by her tone of sweet assurance, the unrested mind of him whose tottering frame leaned for support upon this gentle girl, and felt that all the world was turned against him.

Was there not a hallowed atmosphere vibrating round them? Was it not a time for things aerial to whisper among themselves and weep in sympathy?

Hark! A slow, mournful chime disturbed the holy silence. It was the tower-clock, in the hall without, striking the hour of eleven.

The clear, harmonious notes of the silver-bells floated through the room, and mystic echoes dwelt upon the air.

They listened to the weird music, as if the strains contained a fascination for the mind, but their thoughts were far from being on the tremor of the bells.

The cadent sounds lingered till minutest keys died out, and then Eola spoke again.

“Father, I am going to ask you something. I want you to promise me you will not be disturbed.”

“What is it, my child?”

“But, first promise me.”

“I promise.”

“Then, you remember Harold Haxon, the day he called to see us, in Baltimore, asked you for the Black Crescent.”

She paused and looked quickly at him. He was calmly listening.

“Well?” he said.

“Now, father, won't you tell me what he wanted with it?”

“I do not know more than you, Eola. I believe he but acted upon the dictation of another.”

“And who was that other?”

“I cannot say. I can scarce imagine he was set to it by Louise Ternor; she must have died.

I have neither seen nor heard anything of her for a long, long while."

"The fortune-teller," suggested Eola.

"For—"

"But that is not the favor I would ask," she hesitated. "I want to see the crescent."

He was more calm, as their conversation touched upon the mysterious article, than she had dared to hope for.

"And why do you wish to see it?" he asked.

"Oh!—because." A woman's reason in the dark.

"You have it upon your arm."

"I know I have. But you have told me so much of the crescent, how it came to us, why I have it pricked upon my arm, that now I want to see it."

"It is but the original device of what is on your arm," he said, evasively.

"So you have told me before. I do not doubt it."

"It gleams with rarest jewels; is made of jet; its value in money would be hard to compute."

"That, too, you have already told me."

"I have it safe," as if he would deviate from her request. "I brought it with me. I dared not trust it in my library, in Baltimore, for it had been discovered, and there were those who would steal it from me."

"Was that why you were so anxious to be alone in your library the night I came to you, up stairs, and found you bleeding?" Eola shuddered.

Remembrance of that night could never be erased from her mind. Its fearful mysteries; the singular behavior of her father, his thin, ghost-like face; the dismissal of Austin Burns; the conflicting thoughts that had robbed her of sleep, and kept her, through the long hours, until morning, wakeful, restless, uneasy—all was so vividly impressed upon her, that, when she recalled it, a clammy chill crept over her.

"Yes," said he, "they had discovered its hiding place."

"They? Who?"

"There must have been more than one—you know there was a woman and a man—else, who struck me when I held Wat Blake—" He stopped short.

Eola knew nothing of the dreadful scene that had transpired on that night in the third story room; he had almost betrayed himself.

"There was more than one," he finished.

"But you are forgetting what I asked. I want to see the crescent. Will you not show it to me?"

"Curb your curiosity, Eola—"

"No, father, I cannot. I want to see that which has been the source of misery to your life since the day you gave way to the will of that vile woman called Louise Ternor."

Harnden Forde thought a moment.

"I can't let you have it," he said, debatingly.

"I do not want to take it from you; merely to look at it."

"Very well." He made a movement to rise.

That Eola had an object in her request was apparent. She laid a hand on his arm, as if to detain him.

"You will show it to me?"

"Yes, my child, you shall see it." He was crossing the room.

Eola arose and said, quickly:

"Stop, father; wait a moment. I—" But he had passed the door.

Had he stayed to hear what she had to say, it would have been better for him.

After gaining his promise to show her the crescent, she did not wish to see it. Why? We shall see anon.

She would have detained him. Something was upon her lips; but her father had disappeared into his room.

The bedroom of Harnden Forde was the first in the rear of the parlor.

He advanced to a large trunk that stood near the window, unlocked and opened it.

The tray was taken out; he reached down to one corner, at the bottom. At the same instant his face was overspread with a ghastly pallor. There was nothing there!

Hurriedly he rummaged through the contents; dragged them out upon the floor; then stared wildly at the empty trunk.

For one brief moment he gazed downward; then, as if struck with some intense agony of brain, he reeled backward, uttered a half-smothered cry, and sunk to the floor.

"Gone! gone!" he gasped. "Oh! God pity me now! It is gone! The Black Crescent is gone!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

EN TABLEAU.

At the same instant that Harnden Forde made the discovery which caused his limbs to give way under him, his brain to whirl, and his tottering form to fall to the floor, there came a loud summons at the door.

The bell clanged and mingled with a foreboding sound, and ominous echoes cut the stillness of the house.

Eola paused half-way across the room, and glanced toward the door of the parlor. An in-

describable feeling riveted her, and—she knew not why—a strange excitement warmed the blood of her young veins.

Twice, thrice, was that summons repeated, and still she stood, as if powerless to move, her large blue eyes widening, and the awe of mysterious suspense creeping upon her.

No sound came from the room in which lay Harnden Forde.

She had heard the stifled cry that told of some overpowering discovery—she had started to follow her father.

Presently a servant came, mumbling and grumbling over the arrival of visitors at so late an hour, inwardly vowing that, though the comers might be the best in the land, he would bid them begone. Half-awake, rubbing his sleepy eyes, he tardily unlocked the door, and was about to demand the business of those who roused him from his nap beside the warm furnace, when a voice anticipated him.

"Does Harnden Forde live here?"

"Yes, sir, 'e does live 'ere," answered the servant, bluntly.

"We wish to see him, then."

The voice was strange to Eola. Who could it be? was the question that flashed through her mind.

"Well, now," returned the servant, "this 'ere's rather a late hour for folks to be a-comin' to see folks—"

"Hark, sirrah! If Harnden Forde is in this house, we will see him at once, if we have to drag him from his bed!" The voice was determined, threatening.

"Yes, sir, but 'e see—"

"No 'buts' about it!" interrupted a sharp voice. "Stand aside. Spoil my umbrella over your nose, if you don't! Hear!"

"But, now, 'e see—" ex postulated the servant. They were pushing past him.

The man was a little frightened. At first he was inclined to yell "thieves"—then he saw there were females in the party. Next he was on the point of calling for help to oppose the forcible intrusion; but the same sharp voice that had before threatened him with a broken nose now said:

"Make a noise, and I'll choke you! Cry out, and I'll make you eat some teeth! Fact! Hear! Dangerous, I am. No fooling, now. Where's Harnden Forde, eh? Rascal!—speak quick!"

"He—he—he's in the p-parlor, sir."

A stamping of feet, the parlor door was pushed back, and Wat Blake, with Christopher Crewly dancing close to his heels, entered the room.

At sight of these strangers, who entered so unceremoniously—the stern look in Blake's countenance, the burning, searching gaze he fixed upon Eola—all brought her to a sense of her position; and she drew her slender figure erect, her cheeks flushed; she contemplated them with haughty inquiry.

Crewly immediately began a circuit of the room, elevating his nose and darting glances here and there, as if taking an inventory of the furniture.

"Sir, what is the meaning of this?"

Eola's bosom heaved; indignation was fast absorbing her emotions.

"Eola! Eola!" Austin Burns sprung forward.

She looked at him in surprise; but it was only for a second.

"Austin—dear Austin!"

"Found at last, darling, after a most tiring hunt!"

Bertha and Ora had entered the room.

"Where is Harnden Forde?" demanded Bertha, her accent somewhat stern.

"Vamoosed, I guess," assumed Crewly, from the depths of an easy-chair.

The servant, who had followed them, now gained the center of the tableau. He was about to resume his expostulations, but stopped short, in dumb astonishment, on seeing Austin Burns clasp Eola to him and shower kisses on her willing lips.

Crewly saw the fellow, and made a jump toward him.

"Rascal!" he cried, but the man was gone.

"Where is Harnden Forde?" asked Bertha, again.

"Oh, mother," said Ora, "don't be so stern. Remember your promise to me. Speak gentler."

"Don't, child, don't. Not now. You unnerve me."

"Is Harnden Forde in this house?" thundered Wat Blake.

"Pitch in! Business," added Crewly.

Eola disengaged herself from her lover, and faced the speaker—faced them all.

"He is. What is your business with him, that it calls for intrusion upon the privacy of our apartments at this unseemly hour? Why do you ask, in such a tone, to see my father? Who are you? Explain, sir, and quickly—your actions need it."

"Look out, Blake!" admonished the lawyer, who evinced a desire to hide behind a chair, as Eola addressed them spiritedly.

"Eola," said Austin, striving to calm her, "wait a few moments. All may be well. You are hasty. These are my friends—"

"Then they are strange ones!"—even rebuking him, in the warmth of ungovernable resentment, a state for which we cannot much blame her. And again, to Blake: "Will you explain, sir? Gentlemen do not force themselves where there are ladies—at least without some due courtesy, and you have given evidence of none. You have entered here as if you were law deputies, with a search-warrant, and we the thieves! You are silent."

"Eola!" interrupted Austin.

"I say, Wat Blake—sell out and retire!" Crewly was grinning—something he had never been known to do of late years. The aspect tickled him.

There was a commotion in the next room.

The voices had aroused Harnden Forde—they were not unfamiliar to him.

He regained his feet, staggered to the folding-doors, and looked in upon them.

Bertha, his wronged wife; Wat Blake, whom he had nearly strangled on that fearful night in Baltimore; Christopher Crewly, whom he had bribed to aid him in his nefarious schemes, and whose life he afterward attempted, through a hired ruffian—assassin—all these faced him, and leveled upon him glances that entered like burning shafts to the innermost depths of his heart, yet did not at once soften, as if they penetrated the contriteness of his crushed soul.

Weak and dizzy from the effects of his late discovery; alarmed, terrified, chilled upon beholding his victims concentrated, as it were, against him; and these combined with a harrowing sense of guilt and utter hopelessness—he gasped for breath and reeled forward, under the shock, like a drunken man.

But for the interposition of a strong, sustaining arm he would have fallen.

"Stand up, Harnden Forde! Man yourself!" said Wat Blake, and the tone was one of pity, even in its sternness.

"Keep your pins!" added Crewly, encouragingly.

All eyes were bent upon the stricken man. Ora's arms were about her mother's neck, and up to then, the last moment, the crisis, she pleaded for her father.

Bertha looked upon him who had wrought her every trial, anguish, sorrow of life; and her dark eyes, at first cold and glittering, now melted to a softer gaze. Woman-like, her heart was touched—the sight of misery broke her bosom's steel.

Eola began to comprehend. Her face paled; she glanced uneasily from one to another of those assembled.

Forde did not, then, mark the lovers. In the momentary stillness that pervaded, things seemed confused in his vision; he rocked unsteadily upon the arm that supported him.

Even Crewly was affected by the solemn scene—a scene in which a broken spirit, tortured with crimes, bowed low in penitence, and mouths seemed powerless in speech.

"Harnden Forde, nerve yourself," said Wat Blake. "We are not here to do you ill."

Ora uttered a low exclamation of joy at hearing these assuring words.

"Go to him—go to him, Ora," whispered Bertha, striving to check the tears that would dim her eyes; for she was but woman, after all, with every golden trait by which her sex is made to soar above the ruder molds of earth.

Two loving arms twined about the neck of Harnden Forde; two blue eyes, lustering in tenderness, were upturned to his; a sweet face centered in his gaze, and Ora, her lips quivering, murmured the one word:

"Father!"

Father! Who called him father? It was not Eola, yet the voice was very like to hers. There was a music in the accent, a sound that strengthened him.

He saw more distinctly—saw a strange, beautiful face that resembled Eola's.

"Who are you?" he articulated faintly, taking the fair head between his hands, as if he would read the features closer.

"Your child! Your child!" was tremored from her lips.

"My child!" He started; the words were repeated involuntarily.

He raised his head and looked slowly around upon those who stood near.

"Bertha!" How strangely calm his voice and mien.

"Husband! Husband!" at one wild bound she reached his side; with a convulsive effort he drew her to his breast.

"Oh, Harnden, Harnden! we are not here to torture or to punish, but to forgive! Yes—we would forgive. Let us make you happy."

"Bertha—poor injured one!" was all he said, holding her more closely to him.

And this had Ora wrought!

"All is past, Harnden," said Bertha, presently; "all is past and forgiven. Let it lie buried. Our children plead this end. Harnden—our children's happiness. You will take me to you?—for I must, I do forgive all, though it has been much and deep."

"Take you to me, Bertha! Oh, can you, can you erase from your memory the years that have passed—"

"Not all, dear Harnden; for there are years

a good way back, in which naught but purest love combined in joys of life. But the dark, sad years that have been like a somber pall upon our lives—these shall be buried forever!"

Forde now, for the first time, observed Austin and Eola. As he marked the fondness with which they clung to each other, a shadow of pain fell upon his face.

"Eola, my child,"—he began, approvingly, but Bertha, who noted his glance, interrupted:

"No, husband, no—why tear asunder two hearts already molded into one? Why sunder them when, it would seem, Heaven has brought them together?"

"Bertha, Bertha; you know not what you say. Austin Burns is our own child!"

"No—impossible! He is not our child, Harnden."

Eola listened in the suspense of long pent eagerness. Bertha's words were like rays from heaven to her hopes.

"Not our child!" exclaimed Forde, buskily.

"Yes—he is—he must be!"

"No. We have but two; Eola is one—here is the other," pointing to Ora.

"Father!" murmured the lovely girl, as if yearning for his caresses; and Forde, after one long, joyous glance at her face—so like Eola's—embraced her as his own.

"Sister!" The voice was Eola's, and in a second the two sisters were locked in a fond caress.

Christopher Crewly and Wat Blake were silent witnesses. Austin felt his heart bounding with threefold delight, for he had heard enough to know that he had recovered Eola, and that Bertha must know of his parents.

But the scene of the night was not yet enacted.

"Harnden Forde, I, too, forgive you," said Blake.

"God bless you, then!" cried Forde, grasping the speaker's hard, brown hands.

"But there is one thing yet undone."

"One thing—what?"

"We feel assured you will not hesitate to complete the happiness of all, by performing one more act of duty."

"Name it."

"Restore the Black Crescent!"

Forde hesitated; he trembled slightly; his eyes were fixed in their old look of fear.

"No—no—no," he stammered. "I—I can not do that. Do not ask me. I can not part with it," and Bertha, who held his hands, felt those hands turn cold as ice.

"But, father, have you got it?" Eola's eyes twinkled strangely as she put the question.

He cried at once:

"You know—you know, Eola, where it is!"

"Yes. Impelled by a curiosity I could no longer restrain, I searched your trunk, hoping to find it—feeling that you could not have left it behind you, in Baltimore. I found it there, carried it to my room, and feasted my eyes long and wonderfully on its beauty. Since I took it, I have had no opportunity to return it to its hiding-place. Wait a moment."

She left them for a few moments. When she rejoined them, she brought the crescent. Its jewels sparkled like a mine of wealth beneath the bright jets of the chandelier.

Forde snatched it from her.

"Give it to them, father," she said. "Restore it to its rightful owner."

"No—I can not."

"But, Harnden, bear us," began Bertha, quickly.

"No—I can not hear you. I must not part with it!"

"Then hear me!" screamed a voice in the doorway.

The tone was sharp and shrill; the words pierced through and through their ears.

Turning, they beheld the bent form and withered visage of an aged bag, whose eyes burned, glittered, danced as she confronted them.

"Hear me!" she cried again; "and maybe I'll tell you something, Harnden Forde, that will make you open your eyes."

It was the old woman who had come upon the scene in the street on Carnival day, and that old woman was Mother Bret.

As this new and unexpected actor came forward, two faces, red with rage, that gazed in through the front windows, were withdrawn from their place of observation; two figures started hurriedly down the steps and made off in the darkness.

"By all the fiends of earth, Gil Bret!" exclaimed one, "I believe our game is lost."

"Y-e-s, Haxy; we'll dig out. Beat, by thunder!"

Haxon did not know Mother Bret, and his conclusions were deduced from the general aspect of the situation.

But the bruiser knew her; he heard her loud, shrill words, and it required no great effort to comprehend that she meant to make a disclosure—that disclosure ruinous to himself and associate.

It is here that we part with the two scoundrels. We can not trace them further in their career; but it will be safe to infer that Gil Bret devised some villainous means for their mutual support.

Whether Harold Haxon ever learned his true identity, is a question we must leave unanswered—and it is no matter.

The bag contemplated the assembled parties for a few seconds; a peculiar grin which added to her ugliness spread upon her seamed and wrinkled face; then stepping forward she spoke again:

"I tell you, Harnden Forde, you can part with the crescent. Look at me—take a good look. Don't you know me? Is there nothing familiar remaining in my crooked, shriveled face? Speak."

For a moment he gazed steadfastly upon the time-seared lineaments, then a whisper escaped his lips.

"You—you are—Madame Fernandez—" he hesitated.

"Yes," she assented, slowly, her dark eyes fixed piercingly upon him. "Yes, I am she. It is I who have helped make your life miserable. It was I who aided Louise Ternor in her schemes of ill and violence. But, I am no more a fortune-teller than you are! Do you hear that? I did it for gold!—gold! I helped to ruin you! The letter that you got from me was written by Louise Ternor herself! It was to frighten you—to keep your child from marrying, until her child came old enough; and my son, Gil Bret, was only waiting for somebody to come first—according to the letter—when he'd push in Harold Haxon, and have him marry her!"

"Harold Haxon!" cried Forde, the perspiration standing in great beads on his forehead, as he listened to her speech. "Is Harold Haxon Louise Ternor's child?"

"Yes." He groaned aloud. Mother Bret continued: "I'll swear to all I've said. You needn't be afraid to give up the crescent; Louise Ternor made that tale up, to further cut her rival and enemy, whom she hated! It was her—" pointing to Bertha. "You needn't be afraid to give your child to this young man" (glancing at Austin); "he's n't your flesh and blood, that I know, 'cause I've kept track of you pretty close, and I know you've only got two children—there they are." She raised a skinny finger and pointed toward Eola and Ora.

Ora shrunk before the light of those snaky eyes, as she had been wont to do, in trembling, oftentimes during that portion of her life passed with the bag.

"And what am I doing all this for?" she added, without a pause. "Hey! What am I saying all this for, now? I'll tell you. I'm getting old—very old—too old. I'm going to die soon—we've all got to die! I thought I'd fix things straight before I went; and I guess I've done it. We have used you pretty hard, in years back. But you know me?—then you know that I needn't want to lie about it. That's all. Now be happy, if you can; you've seen the last of me—the last! Hal hal! hal! hal!"

"Woman! woman!" Harnden Forde leaped forward, as if to detain her.

Christopher Crewly made a like movement, in which he tripped over his umbrella, fell against a chair, uttered a squeal—then stopped short, made a noise with his lips, as one will who enjoys the juice of a peach, at the same time rubbing his shins with vehement rapidity.

Mother Bret had disappeared. As she concluded with that low laugh of sepulchral strain, she vanished, and was seen nevermore thereafter by those with whom she had been so strangely connected.

"Here is a paper, Harnden Forde," said Blake, "which Harold Haxon held over you to bind you to his will—"

"Give it to me—give—"

"No—I will do this," and, as he spoke, the document so dreaded by the penitent man was scattered in fragments on the carpet.

What more?

The bag's explanation satisfied Forde. His bonds were broken; the Black Crescent was restored.

Eola and Ora are happy in their father's love. Bertha now looks back with a shudder on those years of trial. She and her husband live in a renewal of that affection which the machinations of an evil woman had, for a time, destroyed.

Winter had faded in the genial warmth of spring; the blooming flowers are not brighter than the joys which cluster round Austin Burns and his lovely bride.

To all our characters we say farewell—excepting one. Christopher Crewly has not yet seen his share of adventure, and is destined to figure again in a strange story.

The lawyer was only partially satisfied with the turn things had taken; he had hoped for a grand *denouement* of police and law cases.

But the gentle Ora soon smoothed even this, and when the old lawyer bade them adieu, to return to Richmond, he stood his umbrella against the wall, while he grasped the young girl's hands and said:

"It's all right. Yours forever—much!"

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